

PRELUDE TO CONSTANTINE: THE INVENTED TRADITION OF KING ABGAR OF EDESSA

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The conventions of *L'Année philologique* are followed for titles of periodicals. For ancient sources we use, in general, the conventions of Albert Blaise and Henri Chirat in *Dictionnaire Latin-Français des auteurs Chrétiens* (Strasbourg, 1954); G. W. H. Lampe in *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961); Henry George Liddel, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, et al., in *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1968); and P. G. W. Glare in *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982). Note also the following abbreviations:

| | |
|------|---|
| AJ | Josephus, <i>The Jewish Antiquities</i> |
| ANRW | <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> . Edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin 1972-. |
| CCSG | Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca (Turnhout, 1977 ff.) |
| CCSL | Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout, 1967 ff.) |
| CFHB | Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae (Washington DC, 1967 ff.) |
| CMC | <i>Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis</i> |
| CSCO | Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Paris, Louvain, 1903 ff.) |
| CSEL | Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna, 1866 ff.) |
| FC | The Fathers of the Church |
| GCS | Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte |

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>HE</i> | Eusebius <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i> Edited by Eduard Schwartz (Leipzig, 1903/1908). Translated by Roy J. Deferrari, FC 19, 29 (New York, 1953, 1955); G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, England, 1989). Kirsopp Lake, LCL 153-4 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1926). |
| <i>JECS</i> | <i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i> |
| <i>JRS</i> | <i>Journal of Roman Studies</i> |
| <i>L&S</i> | <i>A Latin Dictionary</i> . Edited by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. Oxford, 1989. |
| <i>LC</i> | Eusebius of Caesarea. <i>De laudibus Constantini</i> . Edited by Ivar Heikel, TU 36, GCS 7. Leipzig, 1911. Translated by H. A. Drake. Berkeley, California, 1976. |
| <i>LCC</i> | The Library of Christian Classics |
| <i>LCL</i> | Loeb Classical Library |
| <i>LCJ</i> | <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . Edited by Henry George Liddel, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, et al. Oxford, 1968 |
| <i>Keph.</i> | Mani, <i>Kephalea</i> , ed. and trans. H. J. Polotsky <i>et al.</i> (Stuttgart, 1940 ff.) |
| <i>NHC</i> | <i>Nag Hammadi Codices</i> |
| <i>NPNF</i> | Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers |
| <i>OLD</i> | <i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> |
| <i>PG</i> | <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca</i> . Edited by J. P. Migne. 1666 vols. Paris 1857-66. |
| <i>PL</i> | <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina</i> . Edited by J.-P. Migne. 222 vols. Paris, 1844-1902. |
| <i>PO</i> | <i>Patrologia Orientalis</i> , ed. R. Graffin and F. Nau (Paris, 1907 ff.) |
| <i>Porph. Chr.</i> | Porphyry. <i>Adversus Christianos</i> . Edited by Adolf von Harnack, <i>Abhandlungen der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophische-historische Klasse</i> . 1916 |
| <i>PWK</i> | <i>Paulys Real-encyclopädie der klassischen</i> |

Altertumswissenschaft. Edited by A. F. von Pauly, Georg Wissowa, and Wilhelm Kroll. Munich, 1962-78.

- SC Sources chrétiennes
- SHA Scriptores Historiae Augustae
- TA *The Teaching of Addai*. Translated by Howard, George. *SBL Texts and Translation, Early Christian Literature Series*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981.
- TU Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
- VC Eusebius of Caesarea. *De vita Constantini*. Edited by Friedhelm Winkelmann, GCS 7. Berlin, 1975. Translated in Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuard G. *Life of Constantine: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

CHAPTER I

HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Suspicious Tradition

In the year 943 the troops of the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959) entered the city of Edessa, an important Mesopotamian town which the Arab Caliphs had held for over three hundred years. The takeover was one of the high points of the Byzantine re-conquest of the Near East undertaken by the rulers of Macedonian dynasty (867-1056). This effective ruling house represents not only the apogee of Byzantine military might, but also the pinnacle of the Byzantine ability to make diverse local Christian traditions of the Empire into an effective instrument of political propaganda. For example, in August of the next year the victorious troops brought back to Constantinople the most precious relic of the city of Edessa, the cloth with the image of Jesus on it.¹ At about the same time, while the Byzantine emperors were re-conquering the Middle East and bringing sacred objects as trophies to the capital, a fresco was painted in the Monastery of Saint Catherine of Sinai, patronized by the funds directly from the imperial chancery. That fresco was a

¹ This image, also known as the Holy Mandylion, has a history of its own, but it is first mentioned in the fifth century Syriac text known as the Abgar legend. The literature about the Mandylion is immense. For the most extensive survey see E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* (TU 18, n.F. 3; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899). Robert Drews provides a succinct introduction to the scholarly debates regarding its history. See Robert Drews, *In Search of the Shroud of Turin* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984).

representation of the king Abgar of Edessa, the man who gave the order that the portrait of Jesus be made, according to the story preserved under the name of Abgar legend.

What is conspicuous about this fresco is that the text above the portrait says it is an image of king Abgar, but the king looks remarkably like Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, the patron of the fresco. Painting the likeness of the emperor on the fresco was not the vain action of an affluent and overconfident patron but a piece of political propaganda. It linked the imperial house in Constantinople with the pious Near Eastern king known from Christian stories from the area in order to consolidate the support for the Byzantine emperor in the East.

Furthermore, the image of the Byzantine Emperor in the garb of the ancient king of Edessa represents an advanced stage of what can be called “the myth of Edessa,” a story about a city-state which showed piety and reverence toward Jesus in his lifetime and was thereby blessed for eternity. It is not surprising that one of the best histories of Edessa carries the title “Edessa the Blessed City,” reflecting the manner in which the city wanted to see itself.² Behind “the myth of Edessa” a complicated web of power lays hidden. This dissertation is an attempt to untangle that web.

The history of Edessa is as turbulent as the past of any other city in the Middle East. The Byzantine reconquest did not last very long. Because the Byzantine Empire fell into a military and economic crisis, it was forced to abandon most of its territories in Asia after the decisive defeat by the Seljuk

² See Judah Benzion Segal, *Edessa the Blessed City* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

Turks at Mantzikert in 1071. After the Byzantines, the Crusaders arrived in the famous Mesopotamian city and organized themselves there for almost half a century. As a result they took “the myth of Edessa” back to Europe, where it gained in allure as a part of the enchanting baggage of the Crusades. The image of the pious city standing calmly far away in the East, laden with Oriental grandeur and blessed directly by Jesus, captured the imagination of many Europeans. Colonialism brought the English to the Near East and “the myth of Edessa” continued its transformation in the times of printing press. The myth of the blessed city captured the imagination of the Westerners once again. Many nineteenth-century English homes had in their possession a copy of the letter of Jesus to the king Abgar, and the discovery of a papyrus fragment caused some excitement among the general public.³

In approaching the “myth of Edessa” one can look for the reality behind it, or alternatively one can look at the reception and appropriation of the story at various places and times. The story about the pious king who showed respect to Jesus lies at the bottom of the “myth of Edessa.” Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus showed himself to be a prudent and effective politician who knew how to use Christian fiction to enhance the authority and prestige of the throne. This fresco brings strikingly to our attention the possibility that the Abgar legend might have served various purposes at different times in history. In this dissertation we will trace the pathways of that story and look at the Abgar legend and its function in religion and politics during the fourth century.

³ The popular interest for the legend in England is illustrated by the fact that the *Daily Express* from May 2, 1900 reported the finding of a papyrus fragment of the Abgar legend at Ephesus.

The Abgar legend is a Christian apocryphal story about Jesus and Abgar, king of Edessa, a ruler of the city in upper Mesopotamia known today in Turkey by the name Urfa. Two well-known apocryphal stories claim connection with the city. According to the local tradition Abraham's encounter with Nimrod in Genesis 11:5 takes place in Edessa. In fact the city still proudly preserves the so-called "pool of Abraham" as a testament to the patriarch's alleged sojourn there. The other story is about Abgar, the legendary king of the city who ruled it in the first century.

The story of Abgar tells about the illness of the king, his plea for help and the letter of invitation to Jesus. It continues with the letter of response to the king, allegedly written by Jesus himself. In the reply, Jesus explains why he would not be able to come to Edessa and promises to send a disciple in his stead. After the exchange of letters, the story continues with the event following the resurrection of Jesus. One of the disciples, sometimes called Thaddeus and at other times Addai, is sent to the city in upper Mesopotamia. The story continues with the adventures of Thaddeus/Addai on his mission. After a while he is introduced to Abgar, who receives him well, listens to his message, and finally converts to Christianity.

Our task will be to investigate the meaning of this story and, as the sources allow, to write a micro-history of the Christian community in Edessa in the third and the fourth centuries. One approach would be to ask a typically technical question, how accurate is the account? This is a valid question, but the search for the historical king Abgar offers very little rewards for a simple reason: apart

from the listing of his name in the chronicles of Edessa, there is not much else we know about him. Furthermore, the question of historicity is clearly a modern-day question of far less concern for the people who created the story. We believe it is more beneficial to seek what the story meant for the people who created it than to seek historical basis and conclude that it has very little. It is more rewarding to see how the story was used and what it meant at different times and places than to search for the obvious. Therefore, before one starts with dissecting the story as if it were a legal case to be presented to a jury, we suggest that it is more productive to try to make sense of what we have. By examining how the story was used, especially during the third and fourth centuries, a new picture of Edessan society will emerge. Such a picture is more likely to answer the more important questions of how and for what than to provide a satisfactory answer as to when and who.

Before we proceed with the interpretation, we will offer a review of previous scholarship. So far most scholars have focused on the question of historicity. Without much doubt one can say that somebody, somewhere, fabricated the story. The details of this fabrication remain beyond our powers of reconstruction, in spite of the numerous attempts to penetrate behind the barrier placed in front of all scholars by the absence of evidence for the early history of the Abgar legend.

Review of Scholarship

After the realization that the legend lacks historical dependability, many scholars attempted to discover the “true” purpose of the legend. The assumption that the legend has two meanings, the one obvious and the other hidden, led to the reading of the text as an allegory for the arrival of Christianity in Edessa. It was suggested that the legend allegorically describes either the arrival of Christian missionaries from the West some one hundred and fifty years later, or the imposition of uniformity on a diverse Christian community some three hundred years after the events described in the text. For the most part scholars were searching for the specific setting in which the legend was created; they never explained why such allegorizing became necessary. Following the review of the scholarship we will suggest a different approach. While bearing in mind that reliable information regarding Christianity in Edessa for the period before the Great Persecution remains, by and large, unavailable, we shall acknowledge that the legend performed various functions in different political contexts. We will look at the potential and actual role the political rhetoric of the tale might have performed during the turbulent events taking place in Edessa in the fourth century, always bearing in mind that it was a small border town in the area that divided two hostile world powers, the Persian and the Roman Empires. In short, instead of the search for the historical core and the fictional husk, we will start with the husk, the most recent layer of the legend, and move back in time as far as the evidence allows it.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century scholarly opinion has remained divided into two well-defined camps. Only recently some new solutions geared

toward overcoming polarization were suggested. The division between the two groups reflects the rivalry between British and German scholarship. In response to the discovery of the Syriac text of the *Teaching of Addai* late in the nineteenth century, the first proposals regarding the original context were made early in the century. Two very influential historians of early Christianity suggested solutions and the scholarship largely followed their lead, with one group following the hypothesis of F. C. Burkitt, the other of Walter Bauer.⁴

Burkitt developed his argument gradually, standing on the extraordinary achievements of British scholars of Syriac literature in the nineteenth century.⁵ He thought that the narrative itself reflects the “historical” conversion of Abgar VIII the Great (177-212), not Abgar V (13-50). Burkitt begins his reconstruction with the phrase saying that Palut, second successor of Addai, traveled to Antioch to be ordained by the bishop Serapion who, in turn, was ordained by Zephyrinus of Rome. Both Zephyrinus and Serapion are historical persons. Serapion was bishop of Antioch from 190 to 211. Burkitt compares Serapion with his contemporary Irenaeus (c. 170 – c. 200) because of his emphasis of orthodoxy and canonical four gospels. Like Irenaeus, Serapion was a determined opponent of Gnosticism and consequently must have been opposed to bishops whose claim to apostolic succession was not beyond a shadow of doubt. Burkitt writes,

⁴ Among those who accepted Burkitt’s position are A. Fortescue, *The Lesser Eastern Churches* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1913); L. J. Tixeront, *Les Origines l’église d’Édesse et la légende d’Abgar* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Ch. Le Clerc, 1888); Hans Lietzmann, *History of the Early Church*, 4 vols., trans. B. L. Wolf (London: Lutterworth, 1937-51) and H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* vol. 1. (Penguin, 1967). R. Duval came with a judgment similar to Bauer’s some thirty year earlier. See. Rubens Duval, *Histoire politique, religieuse et littéraire d’Edessa jusqu’à première croisade* (Paris, 1892).

⁵ F. C. Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* (London: John Murray, 1904), chap. 1.

“If, therefore, Serapion ordained Palut, Palut could not have been converted to Christianity by one of the seventy-two disciples.” Serapion would have known better. Therefore, Burkitt concludes, Christianity could not have reached Edessa much before the middle of the second century and Palut, the third leader of Christians in Edessa, was not ordained bishop till about 200.⁶

Burkitt also noted that the legend could not have been much older than the Great Persecution. The *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya*, the sequel to the Abgar story, make this fact obvious. Its plot ends when an edict of toleration is issued by the emperors.⁷ The edict in question is without doubt the edict of toleration issued by Constantine and Licinius in 313 after the two emperors met in Milan.⁸ The story in the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya* can be summarized as follows: Barsamya is the bishop of Edessa in succession to Abshelomo, who succeeded Palut. He is also mentioned in the *Teaching of Addai*.⁹ Sharbel, the chief priest of Bel and Nebo, was converted by Barsamya, and on that account both are arrested. Sharbel is put to death. When Barsamya is about to be executed, an edict of toleration arrives from the emperors! He is dismissed in peace.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19. Burkitt later seems to have changed his mind and suggested that Addai was, in fact, Tatian, the alleged author of the *Diatessaron*. In *JTS* xxv (1924), 130. For a brief review see also: Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 4-7.

⁷ As indicated by the plural ‘emperors’ the author believes that the Roman Empire was always ruled by two emperors and their two deputies, i.e. the tetrarchs.

⁸ Lactantius describes the letter of Licinius send to the governors of the provinces. The author was apparently familiar with this form of the edict. See Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 48.2-12.

⁹ The line of apostolic succession assumed by the legend implies that Addai was succeeded by Aggai, Aggai by Palut, Palut by Abshelomo, and Abshelomo by Barsamya.

In 1934 Bauer came up with a different proposition. He argued that the legend was a part of a clever scheme executed by the first orthodox/catholic bishop of Edessa, Qune (d. 313).¹⁰ According to Bauer the Abgar legend is, first and foremost, a pamphlet against heresies. By establishing the apostolic succession of his bishopric, Qune was able to suppress the non-orthodox forms of Christianity. Edessa became a showcase for Bauer's thesis that heresy stood at the beginning of the Church, while the Orthodox Church emerged only after long controversies.¹¹ His study, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, consists of six case studies on major Christian centers such as Edessa, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. Out of all the names in the list, Bauer's passionate task of deconstructing the apostolic foundation proved to be the easiest in the case of Edessa. He proceeded in two steps. First he had to show that Christianity did not come to Edessa as it is fraudulently described in the Abgar legend and that Edessa cannot stake a valid claim at apostolic foundation. He believed that the text has no relationship with historical reality whatsoever, saying that the only reliable historical fact contained in the legend is the link between the Jews already present in the city and the incoming Christian

¹⁰ Walter Bauer *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (BHT 10; Tübingen: Mohr, 1934; 2nd ed. 1963); ET R. A. Kraft and G. Krodel, eds., *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). R. Duval reached the same conclusion even before Bauer. See R. Duval, *Histoire politique, religieuse et littéraire d'Edessa jusqu'à première croisade* (1892).

¹¹ Bauer's application of the terms 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' to the early church scene involved a certain terminological anachronism. See Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 5.

missionaries. By general assessment Bauer made the case on the first point with much success.¹²

Continental scholars following in the footsteps of Bauer, such as H. Koester and H. J. W. Drijvers, accepted the main point of Bauer's proposition that the Abgar legend is a tractate of the orthodox party intended to suppress heresy in Edessa. Whereas Bauer did not identify the specific heresy which the *Teaching of Addai* was combating, Drijvers amended this omission. On the basis that Adda was the name of one of the main Manichean missionaries to the West, Drijvers argues that the legend combats the strong Manichean influence in the region.¹³ The advantage of Drijvers' hypothesis is that it explains convincingly the striking similarity of the two names, Adda and Addai. On the other hand, by emphasizing exclusively the connection between Christianity in Edessa and Manicheism, Drijvers overlooks wider socio-cultural influences at play. Nobody would deny that the reaction to nascent Manicheism must have played some role in the formation of the Orthodox Church in Edessa, but one should not generalize from a single instance of influence.

British scholarship took a different route and emphasized the connection between Syrian Christianity and Judaism. J. B. Segal, unquestionably one of the best-informed historians of Edessa, came down on Bauer's side, but with due caution. He acknowledged that there is merit in the imaginative hypothesis of Burkitt and that the legend suggests that Abgar VIII "might have been well

¹² See Thomas Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined* (Lewiston, N.Y: E. Mellen Press, 1988).

¹³ H. J. W. Drijvers, "Addai und Mani. Christentum und Manichäismus im dritten Jahrhundert in Syrien", *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 221 (Rome, 1983), 171-185.

disposed towards the Christians, but he need not have actually adopted the new religion.” Furthermore, Segal suggested that Christianity might have come to Edessa neither from Jerusalem, as the legend implies, nor from Antioch as Burkitt believed, but from another small Persian border kingdom lying some four hundred miles east and fifty miles east of the Tigris river, Adiabene.¹⁴ This area, traditionally known as Assyria, had a large Jewish population, and its ruling house, led by King Izates and his mother Helena, converted to Judaism around 40 C.E.¹⁵ Robert Murray became the most determined proponent of the theory that Christianity came to Edessa, not as the Abgar legend describes it, but from Adiabene. Murray, in fact, reads the Abgar legend as an allegory about the spread of Christianity in Mesopotamia, from its beginnings in Jewish strongholds such as Adiabene to full growth in the cities such as Edessa, where Christians were soon to become a considerable force. Developing an earlier suggestion, Murray claims that the Edessene story of the conversion of Abgar was borrowed by fourth-century Christians from their former Jewish brothers to the east.¹⁶ Judaism in Adiabene did have historic links with Palestine, and Christianity in Syriac-speaking areas is best accounted for as a breakaway movement among the Jewish community in Adiabene.

There is no doubt that the account of the conversion to Judaism of King Izates of Adiabene looks very similar to Abgar’s conversion to Christianity, but no

¹⁴ Segal, *Edessa*, 65, 69.

¹⁵ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.2.1-4. See also Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2.16.4.

¹⁶ Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 8-9. The borrowing from the Jewish community in Adiabene was first suggested by J. Marquart, *Osteuropäische und Ostasiatische Streifzüge* (Leipzig, 1903).

one to my knowledge has ventured to undertake a full literary comparison between the two accounts.¹⁷ If Edessa borrowed and adapted the story from Adiabene Jews, there are several ways this could have happened. Our argument will be that Josephus played a very important part in the process of borrowing. His role as the main source of the fathers of the Church about Judaism in the times of Jesus Christ put him in a unique position to exercise influence posthumously. The second flaw in Murray's thesis is that he provides no motive for the borrowing.¹⁸ What further complicates the relationship between Abgar and the Izates story is that Eusebius draws heavily from Josephus, especially in the first book of *Ecclesiastical History*, the same part of the book where the Abgar legend also stands. We can be certain that Eusebius read the Adiabene story. What remains to be determined is in what way he was influenced by it. This question will remain for the following chapters.

What is missing in all the approaches mentioned above is a rationale for reading the legend allegorically, that is, why the story of Abgar's conversion should be used as a backdrop for the real tale, the arrival of Christian missionaries to Edessa. Our argument does not doubt that the story is an allegory, but the problem is to determine what the allegory is about. Furthermore, is the story an allegory with just one main point, or there are layers that speak to

¹⁷ For example, as in the Abgar legend, a certain Jewish merchant Ananias, is instrumental in the conversion of the ruler. It is interesting that both merchants carry the same name.

¹⁸ Murray writes: "One need not speak of forgery or deceit; when a community comes to need a foundation legend, saint or holy place of its own, it is not long before one appears, springing up out of the teeming underworld of folk memory and legend." Murray, *Symbols*, 9.

different audiences? Our thesis is that the legend contains many layers, many of which reflect different social and historical circumstances.

The first to look seriously at the redactional layers of the legend was Sebastian Brock.¹⁹ He provided a reliable redactional analysis, and we will use it as the starting point. In an article that seeks to assess the reliability of information about Syriac Christianity provided by Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, Brock begins his source analysis of the Abgar legend by accepting the consensus that "no serious scholar would accept it at face value."²⁰ Brock compares two main versions of the legend, the short précis in Eusebius (c. 260 – c. 340) and the long Syriac version, also known as *The Teaching the Addai*, usually dated to around 500 C.E. Both versions contain some shared material as well as particular additions. The shared material is similar enough to indicate the existence of an earlier source. Brock identifies this with the source used by Eusebius.²¹ We will call it *Early Syriac Version* (ESV). The dating of the *Early Syriac Version* cannot be pushed much before the second half of the third century, but that should leave no doubt that the legend circulated in either oral or written form even before Eusebius wrote it down. In order to introduce the reader to the text of the legend itself, the shared material is translated in parallel columns below. One should assume that the *Early Syriac Version*, circulating in and around Edessa in the

¹⁹ Sebastian Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity" in Harold Attridge and Gohei Hata eds., *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 212-234.

²⁰ Brock, "Eusebius", 221.

²¹ Eusebius claims to have used a source taken from the archives of the city of Edessa. According to Brock, the source came from Edessa, but it is improbable that it was kept in the town's archives.

later half of the third century, could not have been much different from Brock's credible reconstruction.

Early Syriac Version

Eusebius, *HE* 1.13.6-22

Teaching of Addai

(1) *Letter of Abgar to Jesus*

6. Abgar Ukkama, the toparch, to Jesus the good Savior who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greetings!

I have heard concerning you and your cures, how they are accomplished by you without drugs and herbs. For, as the story goes you make the blind regain their sight, the lame to walk, and you cleanse lepers and cast out unclean spirits and demons, and you cure those tormented by long disease and raise the dead.

7. And when I hear all these things concerning you I decided that it is one of the two, either that you are God and came down from heaven to do these things, or are a son of God for doing these things.

8. For this reason I write to beg you to hasten to me and heal the suffering that I have. Moreover I have heard that the Jews are murmuring against you, and wish to molest you.

9. Now I have a city, very small and venerable which is enough for both.

Abgar Ukkama to Jesus the good doctor who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, my lord, greetings! I have heard concerning you and your healing, that you are not healing with drugs and herbs. For by your word you open the eyes of the blind, you cause the lame to walk, and you cleanse lepers, and the dumb you cause to hear, and spirits and demons and the tormented by your very word you heal; even the dead you raise. And when I heard the wonderful great things that you are doing I decided wither that you are God who came down from heaven and have done these things, or you are the Son of God who do all these things. For this reason I have written to beg you to come to me, a I worship you, and heal a certain sickness which I have, as I have believed in you. Moreover, I have heard this too, that the Jews are murmuring against you and are persecuting you and even want to crucify you and are intent on harming you. Now, I hold a city small and beautiful which is enough for both to live there in quiet.

(b) *Letter of Jesus to Abgar*

10. Blessed are you who have believed in me, not having seen me, for it is written concerning me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen me will believe and live. Now concerning what you wrote to me to come to you, I must first complete here all for which I was sent, and after thus completing it, to be taken up to him who sent me, and when I have been taken up I will send you one of my disciples to heal your suffering and give life to you and those around you.

(c) *Narrative*

11. Now after Jesus had ascended Judas, who is also Thomas, sent to him Thaddeus as an apostle being one of the Seventy and he came and stayed with Tobias, son of Tobias. Now when news of him was heard it was reported to Abgar that an apostle of Jesus has come here as he wrote to him.

12. So, Thaddeus began in the power of God to heal every disease and weakness so that all marveled. And when Abgar heard the great and wonderful deed that he was doing and how he was curing, he began to suspect that this was the one of whom Jesus had written, saying, "When I have been taken up, I will send you one of my disciples who will heal your suffering.

13. So he summoned Tobias with whom Thaddeus was staying, and said, "I hear that a certain man of power has come, and is staying in your house. Bring him up to me." And Tobias came

Blessed are you who, not having seen me, have believed in me, for it is written concerning me that those who see me will not believe in me, and those who do not see me will believe in me. Now concerning what you wrote to me that I should come to you: that concerning which I was sent here is henceforth completed, and I am going to ascend to my Father who sent me, and when I have ascended to him I will send you one of my disciples who will heal and restore the sickness you have, and everyone who is with you he will convert to eternal life. And your town shall be blessed, and an enemy shall not have dominion over it ever again.

After Christ had ascended to heaven Judas Thomas sent to Abgar Addai the apostle who was one of the Seventy-Two apostles. And when Addai came to the town of Edessa, he stayed at the house of Tobia, son of Tobia, a Jew who was from Palestine. And when news of him was heard in all the town, there entered one of Abgar's noble and he spoke about Addai – his name was Abdu, son of Abdu, one of Abgar's leading men who sat on bended knee: "Look, a messenger has come and stayed here, the one concerning whom Jesus sent to you a message saying, 'I am going to send you one of my disciples.'"

And when Abgar heard these things and the mighty deeds which Addai was doing, and the wonderful cures which he was performing, he was of the firm opinion that "Truly, this is the man of whom Jesus had sent a message, 'When I have ascended to heaven, I will send you one of my disciples.'"

Now Abgar sent and summoned Tobia and said to him, "I hear that a certain

to Thaddeus and said to him, "The toparch, Abgar, summoned me and asked me to bring you to him in order to heal him." And Thaddeus said, "I will go up since I have been miraculously sent to him."

14. So Tobias rose up early the next day and taking Thaddeus came to Abgar. Now as he went up, while the king's magnates were standing present, as soon as he entered a great vision appeared to Abgar on the face of the apostle Thaddeus. And when Abgar saw this, he did reverence to Thaddeus, and wonder held all those who were standing by for they had not seen the vision that appeared only to Abgar.

15. Then he asked Thaddeus, "Are you of a truth a disciple of Jesus, the son of God, who said to me 'I will send you one of my disciples who will heal you and give you life?'" and Thaddeus said, "Since you have had great faith in him who sent me, for this reason I was sent to you. And again, if you believe in him, the request of your heart shall be fulfilled as you believe."

16. And Abgar said to him, "I have such belief in him as to have wished to take force and destroy the Jews, who crucified him, had I not been prevented from this by the Roman Empire. And Thaddeus said, "Our Lord has fulfilled the will of his Father, and after fulfilling it has been taken up to the Father."

17. Abgar said to him, "I too have believed in him and in his Father." And Thaddeus said, "For this reason I lay my hand on you in his name." And when he did this immediately he was healed from the disease and the suffering that he had."

18. And Abgar wondered that just as

man of power has come and is staying in your house. Bring him up to me. Maybe there shall be found for me some good hope healing from him."

And Tobias rose up early the next day and brought Addai the apostle, taking him up to Abgar, while Addai knew that "it is by the power of God that I have been sent to him."

And when Addai had gone up and entered Abgar's presence, with his noble standing by him, at his entrance to him a wonderful vision appeared to Abgar from the face of Addai. At that moment Abgar saw that vision he fell down and did reverence to Addai, and great wonder held all those who were standing in his presence, for they did not see the vision which had appeared to Abgar. Then Abgar said to Addai, "Are you of truth the disciple of Jesus that men of valor, the Son of God, who wrote to me 'I will send you one of my disciples for healing and for life?'" Addai said to him, "Since you have from the first had faith in him who sent me to you, for this reason I was sent to you. And when again you believe in him, everything that you shall believe in shall be to you."

Abgar said to him, "I have such belief in him as to have wished to take my force and go and destroy the Jews who crucified him, but I abstained from doing this because of the Roman Empire and the covenant of peace which had been established by me with our lord Caesar, Tiberius, like my ancestors of old."

And Addai said to him, "Our Lord has fulfilled the will of his Father and having completed the will of his begetter, has been raised to his Father, and is seated with him in the glory in which he was from eternity." Abgar said to him, "I

he had heard concerning Jesus so he had in fact received through his disciple Thaddeus who cured him without drugs and herbs, and not only him, but also Abdus the son of Abdus who had the gout; for he to came and fell at his feet and received his prayer at his hands, and was healed. And the same Thaddeus healed many others of their fellow citizens, performing many wonderful deeds and preaching the word of God.

19. And after this Abgar said, "O Thaddeus, it is by the power of God that you do these things and we ourselves have wondered. But in addition to this, I beg you narrate to me concerning the coming of Jesus, how it happened, and concerning his power and by what power he did these things of which I have heard."

20. And Thaddeus said, "I will now be silent, but since I was sent to preach the word, tomorrow summon for me an assembly of all your citizens and I will preach before them, and sow in them the word of life, concerning the coming of Jesus, how it happened, and concerning his mission, and for what reason he was sent by the Father, and concerning his power and his deed and the mysteries which he spoke in the world and by what power he did these things and concerning his new preaching and concerning his lowliness and humiliation, and how he humbled himself and put aside and made small his divinity, and was crucified and descended into Hades, and broke the barrier which had not been broken from the beginning of the world, and raised the dead, and he went down alone, but ascended with a great multitude to his Father."

21. So Abgar commanded his citizens

too believe in him and in his Father." And Addai said to him, "Because you have thus believed I lay my hand on you in the name of him in who you have believed." And immediately as he laid his hand on him he was healed from the harm of the disease which he had had for a long while. And Abgar was amazed and wondered that just as he had heard concerning Jesus, that he was performing and healing, so Addai too without drugs of any kind was healing in the name of Jesus including Abdu, the son of Abdu, who had the gout in his feet, and he laid his hand on them and healed him, and he no longer had the gout. And also in the whole city he performed mighty healings, manifesting wondrous powers in it.

Abgar said to him, "Now that everyone knows that it is by the power of Jesus Christ that you do these wonders and we ourselves have wondered at you works, I beg you, therefore, tell us concerning the coming of Christ, how it happened, and concerning his glorious power, and concerning the wonders which we have heard that he was doing, which you saw along with the rest of you companions." Addai said to him, "Of this I will not be silent from preaching, because for this reason I was sent here to speak and to teach everyone who is willing to believe like you. Tomorrow assemble for me all the city and I will sow in it the word of life in the proclamation which I shall preach before you both concerning the coming of Christ, how it happened, and concerning his glorious power, and concerning his Sender, why and how he sent him, and concerning his power and his wonderful deeds and concerning the glorious mysteries of his coming which spoke in the world

to assemble in the morning to hear the preaching of Thaddeus, and after this he ordered him to be given gold and silver, but he did not receive it, saying, "If we have left our own things, how shall we take those of others?"

22. These things were done in the 340th year. [The year of the Seleucid era which started in 312 B.C.E. and corresponds to the year 28 C.E.]

and concerning the exactitude of his preaching, as he made small and humbled his exalted divinity in the body which he had assumed and was crucified and descended to the place of the dead, and broke the barrier, which had never been broken, and revived the dead by his being killed, and he went down alone, but ascended with many to his glorious Father."

And Abgar ordered silver and gold to be given to him. Addai said to him, "How can we take what is not ours, for our own things we have left, as we were commanded by our Lord, to be without purse and without wallets; rather, carrying crosses on our shoulders, we have been commanded to preach his gospel in all creation."

Finishing his source analysis Brock concluded that the *Early Syriac Version* was used both by Eusebius and by the author of the *Teaching of Addai* for the purpose of "tendentious propaganda."²² Thereby, Brock has opened the way for analyzing the reception history of the Abgar legend and that will be the main task of this dissertation. Our main concerns will be to analyze the rhetoric of both editors in order to define what was the purpose of the "tendentious propaganda" so clearly noted by Brock.

In short, Brock's emphasis on the redactional process stand in contrast with previous scholarship that was seeking, without due consideration for the text as a whole, only to extract reliable historical information. Our research builds on the conclusions of Brock, but goes beyond his redaction analysis. We are not

²² Brock, "Eusebius", 228.

exclusively interested in a reconstruction of the editorial process. Redaction criticism is still about how to separate the material according to its reliability, in other words, how to separate the wheat from the chaff. We believe that by emphasizing the process by which the legend was transmitted and transformed from one generation to another, we can gain more than by strictly looking at the editorial activity apparent in various versions of the legend. A considerable amount of information about Syriac Christianity is contained in what was time and again rejected as “chaff.” By emphasizing the redactional process, Brock has opened the way for a comprehensive reconstruction of the reception history of the legend to be undertaken in this dissertation.

Outline

Reception theory emphasizes that, as time goes by, a text is received by different readers who, for the most part, do not share the same expectations as the original or intended readers.²³ Every new generation of readers interprets and transforms the text, so that it becomes a “fusion of past and present.” A text could mean one thing to its author, but it might signify something very different to subsequent generations of readers and editors. Applying the method of reception history in the first chapter, our approach will start from the most recent manifestation of the legend, try to situate it in its historical context by looking at

²³ Hans R. Jauss, *Toward An Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. T. Bahti (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982).

its political rhetoric, and move to the previous strata of reception. All the phases in the reception history will provide us with useful information about the micro-history of the Christian community in Edessa, because each stage in the process of reception indicates the interests and concerns of the story's audience. First, we will examine the part of the legend that can be clearly dated to the later part of the fourth or the early fifth century. In the second chapter we will look at the version that can be dated to the early fourth century, where we will look at the influence of the editorial hand of Eusebius. We will continue this process as far as the evidence will allow, consciously restraining ourselves from bold and imaginative hypotheses like those suggested by previous scholars. It is our contention that the legend tells us very little about the emergence of a Christian community in Edessa during the first two centuries, but it can provide a valuable insight into the life of the church in the third and fourth centuries.

From Rabbinic Judaism we have learned that there is neither beginning nor end in the flow of religious texts. The moment of creation is secondary to the process of reception. Responses to the text and its subsequent transformations tell us more about the religious community that appropriated the story than about who, when, and where created the story.²⁴ We follow the reception of the Abgar legend chronologically, walking backward from the early fifth century to the middle of the third century. A large part of this study is focused on a formal analysis of differences between various versions of the Abgar legend, but our research does not stop at the formal level. Every phase of reception is a

²⁴ Peter J. Haas, *Responsa: Literary History of a Rabbinic Genre* (Semeia Studies, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 12-27.

contribution to discourse, a way in which the early Christians were talking about royal authority and power in general. The ways in which power is constructed in our texts is our primary concern. Our question will be who was the main beneficiary of a particular version or variant.

In the third and fourth chapters we will show that the uniqueness of “the myth of Edessa” is just an illusion, for it is in fact a recreation of the past to serve the purposes of the present. The myth claims that the blessing conferred on the city and its king by Jesus and his apostles is a special privilege assigned only to Edessa. What the fourth chapter reveals is that the myth was a part of a larger literary movement taking hold in various areas where similar stories were circulated. The Abgar legend was not a unique phenomenon, but a part of a larger group of stories about the royal patronage of the apostles. The chapter also indicates that the myth tries to connect Edessa not only to Christianity, but also to the Roman Empire. For a city standing on the border between the Sassanid and Roman empires, such a story carried important political consequences.

Finally, the last chapter looks at the social world of the Abgar legend. Its purpose is to dig up obtainable historical information from the text. There we look at the text not as a window into the first century, the time when the action of the story takes place, but as a mirror of the third- and fourth-century Christian community in Edessa and elsewhere in the satellite states on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. As the brief review of scholarship above has shown, scholars have looked at the legend in order to search for the origins of

Christianity in Edessa. The approach adopted here is different. We look at how the legend was put to use by the mature Christian community in third- and fourth-century Edessa. What was its function in the city in the time after Christianity became a recognized religion and before Christianity became the only recognized religion? In short, the last chapter will look at how the Abgar legend served as a prelude to Constantine. By definition a prelude is an introductory performance, an action or event preceding and preparing for the principal or more important matter. The stories of royal conversion circulating in the late third and the early fourth-century Near East seem to have performed a preparatory function, heralding the changes of the society that would take place in the fourth and the fifth century, once the center of the empire was converted to a new religion.

CHAPTER II

RECEPTION HISTORY OF THE ABGAR LEGEND

Transmission of the Story

The Abgar legend tells how Christianity came to Edessa, a city that was one of the most prominent commercial centers in Northern Mesopotamia and the principal Roman military stronghold on the eastern border of the empire.¹ The legend speaks about a local king who, after being evangelized by one of the apostles, became a believer in Jesus as the Messiah. Because the story is about an apostle who travels, preaches, and evangelizes, it is similar to the well-known stories from the popular genre of apocryphal acts of apostles. The story can also be called a typical Near Eastern court tale, because its action takes place in the royal palace and most of the main characters are courtiers. Conversion of a king to a new religion has obvious political consequences. Furthermore, the story about the conversion of a ruler that took place during the life span of Jesus and three hundred years before Constantine's vision on the Milvian Bridge is destined to perform a political function. On the other hand, a story about an evangelist

¹ Edessa is the Greek (Hellenistic) name of the city. Today the city is called Urfa, a name reminiscent of its Syriac name Orhai. It lies in southeastern Turkey, near the border with Syria. The city was founded in 304 BCE by the veterans of Alexander the Great. During the period between 132 BCE and 214 CE it was the center of an independent kingdom. It later became a Roman colony. It was one of the most prominent centers of Syrian Christianity, the home of the influential School of Edessa and the final outpost towards Zoroastrian Sassanid Empire. For more on the history of the city, see Judah Benzion Segal, *Edessa "The Blessed City"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

who had been instrumental in that conversion was destined to be of fundamental importance for the local ecclesiastical community. It preserves an apocryphal tradition according to which the apostle Judas Thomas receives Syria and the East as his field of operation, but also a local tradition in which the apostle Thaddeus/Addai is the evangelizer of Edessa and the surrounding areas in Upper Mesopotamia.

As the story traveled from area to area and was handed down from one generation to another, it changed and grew, conformed to new circumstances and filled new functions. In this chapter we will trace the reception history of the legend, its transmission and transformation as it was put to use by many generations of Christians.² We will review the main versions of the story, look at the reports about the story, compare them, put them in chronological order, and try to determine their relationship in order to see to what extent we can reconstruct the process of reception. We will try to piece together a picture of how the story developed and grew, regardless of whether or not we find out who wrote it and what its “original form” was. We will also pay some attention to the geographical distribution of the story, but we will limit the scope of our inquiry to the Near East in late antiquity.³ In the coming pages we will proceed as follows:

² Theoretical underpinning is provided by the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Konstanz School of literary history. See H. R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975). In the United States the most important proponent of Gadamer’s ideas is Eric D. Hirsch. He emphasized the distinction between “meaning” and “significance” of a text. With regard to its relationship with historical facts our story has no meaning. However, generations of believers found the story significant enough to elaborate upon it and add to it. See Eric D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

³ If we were to include the reception of the legend across the Western Mediterranean or medieval Europe, this task would become unmanageable. Therefore, we will look only at the East.

First we will examine and define all the versions of our story. Second, we will make our best assessment of the rationale behind this or that particular version. In other words, who would have, potentially or actually, benefited from it?

The story itself is a local tale of Edessa.⁴ Its formation must have begun in the city or in the surrounding areas of Northern Mesopotamia.⁵ Everything in the story has a distinctive local coloring, but the conclusion of the letter of Jesus to Abgar stands out. It contains the blessings of Jesus upon both the king and the city, and consequently Edessa became known as “the blessed city.” In other words, a city in the disputed zone between Christian Rome and Zoroastrian Persia was permanently marked as Christian.⁶ As mentioned in the introduction one can plausibly reconstruct the text of the legend as it was circulating in the later half of the third century.⁷ We agree with Brock that the legend must have circulated in either oral or written form on the local level already in the second half of the third century. Throughout this dissertation we will refer to this version as the *Early Syriac version* (ESV) and will accept Brock’s reconstruction.⁸

Although the origins of the story were local, the inclusion of Jesus in the plot ensured its wider appeal. Eusebius (c. 260 – c. 340), writing the first history of the church in Caesarea of Palestine, somehow got hold of the text of the legend.

⁴ M. R. James, *Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 471.

⁵ We will call the area Northern Mesopotamia. In Arabic, its name is *Al-Jasira*. The Hebrew Bible calls it Paddan-Aram (Gen. 28:6), or Syrian Mesopotamia in Greek. It is surrounded by Syria proper, or Coele Syria to the West. Assyria stands on the East, Mesopotamia and Babylonia to the South, and Armenia to the North.

⁶ The words are: “As for your city may it be blessed and may no enemy ever again rule over it.” The enemy is obviously Sassanid Persia.

⁷ Sebastian Brock’s reconstruction has already been presented in the introduction and it represents the starting point of our analysis. See above pp. 13-19.

⁸ See Figure 1.

He claims that the text was stored in the archives of the city, but doesn't say much about how he obtained the copy.⁹ Scholars generally accept that Eusebius used a written source (ESV), but reject the claim that the original had been stored in the archives.¹⁰ We know that the story circulated orally because contemporary pilgrims talk about its popularity in fourth-century Northern Mesopotamia.¹¹ Very quickly Armenians adopted the story and made Abgar an Armenian king.¹² While the earliest Syriac manuscript can be dated to the fifth century, early versions exist in many languages including Coptic, Greek, Ethiopian, Arabic, and Slavonic.¹³ The letter of Jesus included in the story had a wide appeal. Copies of the letter inscribed in Greek have been found on two stones at Euchaita in northern Anatolia, on a stone at Philippi in Macedonia, and finally on a stone at Kirk Magara near Edessa itself.¹⁴ A papyrus fragment of the letter found in Egypt might have been used as an amulet.¹⁵

In the fourth century the legend suddenly moved beyond the confines of Edessa and its region. At first it spread around the Mediterranean and afterwards moved to northern Europe. The decree "*De libris non recipiendis*" of the pseudo-

⁹ Eusebius, *HE* 1.13.5. The word used is γραματοφυλάκειον or ἀρχεῖον.

¹⁰ The same source (ESV) was also used by the compiler of the *Teaching of Addai*. See Brock, "Eusebius", 228.

¹¹ *Itinerarium Egeriae* 19.5-19.

¹² Moses Khorents'i (of Chorene), *History of the Armenians*, translated by Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). The date of Moses of Chorene's writing is disputed. Moses purports to be a disciple of St. Mesrob, the inventor of Armenian alphabet. If this were the case, he would have lived in the fifth century. The work seems to be best dated to the eighth century.

¹³ The fullest and most recent introduction to the Abgar legend can be found in Alain Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus* (Brepols, Textes en Poche, 1993).

¹⁴ Segal, *Edessa*, 75.

¹⁵ Rolf Peppermüller, "Griechische Papyrusfragmente der Doctrina Addai" in *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971) 289-301.

Gelasius, a document from the sixth century that contains a list of canonical and apocryphal books, lists the story as spurious.¹⁶ The fact that the story is mentioned in a papal decree testifies to its popularity. It circulated in medieval Europe, gaining great popularity there, especially after the Crusades. The Crusaders took Edessa in 1098 but had to abandon it to the Moslems in 1144. During that period the cathedral church of the Latin archbishop guarded the remains of both apostle Addai and king Abgar.¹⁷ Crusaders must have heard the story in Edessa and carried it to Europe as they departed the area.¹⁸

The story begins with the letter sent by King Abgar the Black of Edessa to Jesus. Jesus responds with the promise to send to Edessa, after his ascension to the Father, one of his apostles, namely Thaddeus (Addai in Syriac). It continues with the arrival of Thaddeus to Edessa, his encounter with King Abgar, the miraculous cure of the sick king, the conversion of Abgar and the nobles of the court. Subsequently, Thaddeus delivers a long sermon to the people of the city on the errors of idolatry. It ends with the death of the apostle, the ordination of a new ecclesiastical leader, Aggai, and finally the founding of the episcopal see in Edessa, occupied by Palut, one of the disciples of Thaddeus.

Thaddeus, the protagonist of the story and the alleged founder of the Christian Church in Edessa, is portrayed as an apostolic figure. In the Syriac tradition his name is Addai, but Eusebius identified him with Thaddeus,

¹⁶ M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 21-23.

¹⁷ According to an anonymous semi-poetic text written before 1109, the relics of Abgar and Addai were placed in a 'silver mausoleum' in the church of the Latin archbishop. Segal, *Edessa*, 249.

¹⁸ The Patriarch Michael Qindasi "the Syrian" reports that upon entering Edessa, the Crusaders felt that "just as Edessa believed in Christ before Jerusalem, so Edessa had been given to them by Christ the Savior before Jerusalem." See Segal, *Edessa*, 226.

mentioned in Mt 10:3 and Mk 3:18 as one of the twelve.¹⁹ The Gospels mention nothing more than a name, one on the list. In several witnesses to the so-called Western text, some Latin translations, especially the Old Latin, and in the Latin translation of Origen's commentary on Matthew, he is known as Lebbeus.²⁰ In spite of the variation in the manuscript tradition, the best attested name is Thaddeus. In the later tradition, in contrast to the gospels, he is no longer one of the twelve but is mentioned as one of the wider circle of the seventy.²¹ Furthermore, the *Teaching of Addai* mentions that Thaddeus (or Addai) is "from Paneas, the place where the Jordan River flows forth."²² (Paneas is known in the New Testament as Caesarea Philippi). The *Acts of Thaddeus*, a Byzantine document from the 6th century (or later), places his death in Beirut, "the city on the coast of Phoenicia."²³

In sum, what we have is an invented tradition about Edessa, its king, and the apostolic origins of its church. The tradition starts like a creek and grows to be a mighty river. Our goal is not to search for the source of this tradition, but to look at its development and to see what function did it serve in Edessa and at large.

¹⁹ Luke omitted Thaddeus from the list of the twelve (Lk 6:13-16). See Eusebius *HE* 1.13.1-4.

²⁰ The so-called Cesarean and Byzantine witnesses read Lebbeus called Thaddeus. Thaddeus carries the day on the basis of the Alexandrian text. See the critical apparatus in Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th revised edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

²¹ Eusebius says that Thomas, one of the twelve, sends Thaddeus, one of the seventy, to Edessa see *HE* 1.13.4. The same is repeated by the *Teaching of Addai*, f. 4a.

²² *Teaching of Addai*, f. 14b. George Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1981), 43. Eusebius knows nothing about this tradition, but tell another story about Paneas. He saw the statue of Jesus and the women with hemorrhage there. He also mentions the Roman senator Astyrius, who destroyed the pagan cult at that spot (*HE* 7.17-18).

²³ Ricardus Adelbertus Lipsius ed., *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1959), 278.

Sources and Phases of the Reception

Traces of the Abgar legend are preserved in many sources and versions. We have a continuous stream of oral traditions recorded by numerous authors, named or anonymous. Pieces of the story are scattered around and retold in several different ways. The *Teaching of Addai*, because of its length and the wealth of information it provides about the city, stands apart, but it still does not represent the “authorized version.” In the following we are going to review the arrangement of our versions for the purpose of tracing the process of reception. In the process of reception two phases can be discerned. They are clearly divided by the events of the Great Persecution under Diocletian and his successors and the power struggle that followed the persecution, out of which Constantine emerged as the victor.²⁴ The main difference between the two phases is that the evidence about Christianity in Edessa before the Great Persecution is sparse and circumstantial; after that it is ample and, one might say, even plentiful.

(A) The first phase took place before the Great Persecution (303-313) and the conversion of Constantine. It is impossible to tell with absolute certainty when the legend first appeared. Unfortunately there is no manuscript evidence from this period, only source-critical reconstructions. As a written document the legend’s earliest manifestation is in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, who gave a précis of the narrative, relying on the document found, allegedly, in

²⁴ The Great Persecution is selected because it divides the history of the early Church into two periods, the one before it is poorly documented, the other after it well documented. Many of the documents and evidence for the history of the early Church were lost during the persecution.

the archives of Edessa. It is reasonable to assume that before the Great Persecution the legend circulated in both oral or written form. We call this the *Early Syriac Version* and rely on the reconstruction by Sebastian Brock. One can also surmise that there was another tradition of how Edessa was evangelized where Thomas, not Addai, was the main protagonist, because Egeria, a pilgrim who traveled through the area in 384, mentions its survival.²⁵

Extant sources indicate that there was a Christian community in Edessa at the turn from the second to the third century, but the existence of a Christian edifice, something like the church excavated in the nearby Dura Europos, cannot be confirmed with certainty.²⁶ Furthermore, we hear nothing about the legend itself. Important contemporary witnesses are silent and offer no external verification. There are indications that Abgar the Great, the ruler of Edessa from 177-212, might have been, if not Christian himself, then extremely tolerant toward Christianity.²⁷ The Abgar legend gives us a picture of early Christianity in Edessa that cannot be confirmed by independent sources. Nevertheless, other sources indicate that there was a Christian community in Edessa already in the second century. Moreover, there were several groups of Christians: the Marcionites, followers of Bardaisan, and the Catholics (i.e., the orthodox).

²⁵ See Manuel C. Diaz y Diaz, *Itinerarium Egeriae* (Sources Chrétienne, no. 296; Paris: edition du Cerf, 1982)

²⁶ *Chronicle of Edessa* in *Chronica Minora* ed. by I. Guidi CSCO, Scriptores Syri ser. 3, vol. 4, 1893. See also Segal, *Edessa*, 24-25.

²⁷ The Christian community in Edessa was not unified, but it consisted of many groups including the Marcionites, Valentinian Gnostics, Manichaeans and Palutians (the orthodox or the catholic were called Palutians after the bishop Palut, who was the second successor of Addai). See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 21.

(B) In contrast to the previous phase, the second phase in the reception of the Abgar legend is documented very well. It is only in the fourth century that we begin to see evidence of the wide appeal of the legend; people find the legend important enough to record it for posterity, and many of our sources indicate that the legend was being transmitted in oral form, too. The legend is first mentioned by Eusebius. Then Egeria, a pilgrim who visited Edessa in 384, also mentions it; the fullest version of the legend was recorded in the collection known as *Teaching of Addai*. It is by far the longest and the most detailed account we possess about the legendary arrival of Christian apostles to Edessa.²⁸ In Syriac tradition this version is known as “Labubna” by the name of the scribe who signed the text in the end.²⁹ Having in mind that Eusebius wrote down the legend at the beginning of the century and “Labubna” most probably toward its end, one might say that the fourth century is the time when legend was compiled, shaped,

²⁸ There is an Armenian version of the story recorded by Moses of Chorene, author of the influential “History of the Armenians.” Moses purports to be a pupil of St. Mesrob, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet. If this were the case, he would have lived in the early fifth century. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1998), s. v. ‘Moses of Chorene.

²⁹ Labubna the scribe claims to have been the witness of all the events described in the text. This is, of course, just a literary convention. What is not in doubt is that there was a collector of the legend living the late fourth or early fifth century whose name we do not know. In the Syriac tradition the Abgar legend is universally known as simply Labubna, drawing its name from the scribe who allegedly wrote it down. The scribe is mentioned in the closing lines of the text saying: “I, Labubna, the scribe of the king, wrote down the things concerning the Apostle Addai from the beginning to the end.” One should not forget that Labubna is just a character in the story, not a historical person. In this chapter we will call “Labubna” the anonymous author from the late fourth and early fifth century who actually compiled the text we now call “The Teaching of Addai.” When we talk about the compiler of the *TA* we will always use the quotation marks.

brought together, and finally written down.³⁰ We have two clear snap shots of this process, one provided by Eusebius, the other by “Labubna.”

Finally, there is a later Greek text called the *Acts of Thaddeus*.³¹ This text displays further developments of the Abgar story in the Byzantine environment. It features much more prominently the portrait of Christ made by Ananias (Hanan), one of the secretaries of king Abgar.³² Because the portrait “miraculously” appeared in the year 544 during the siege of Edessa by the Parthians, the text is usually dated after this “discovery.” The conflict over the cult of images taking place in the eighth century is probably the context where this version fits the best.³³ The *Acts of Thaddeus* stand beyond the limits set in this chapter.

The three sources mentioned above, Eusebius, Egeria, and “Labubna” preserve very different versions of the legend. For example, Egeria believes that Jesus sent the apostle Thomas to Edessa; Eusebius has Thomas sending the apostle Thaddeus, one of the seventy; and “Labubna” speaks of Addai. In this chapter we will review these versions, try to reconstruct the process of reception, and point to the main changes present in each of the variants of the legend.³⁴

³⁰ The *Teaching of Addai* can be dated from its mention of the Diatessaron as Holy Scripture. Bishop Rabbula (412-425) banned the Gospel Harmony and was responsible, in all probability, for the new translation called Peshitta. The Syriac text can be found in G. Howard, *The Teaching of Addai*, Early Christian Literature Series (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1981). The critical text is not available, but a photographic reproduction of the best manuscript is available in N. Meshtcherskaya, *Legenda ob Avgare, Rennesirijskij literaturnyj pamjatnik*, Moscow, 1984.

³¹ The text in R. A. Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1959).

³² Eusebius does not mention the portrait of Christ at all. The *Teaching of Addai* mentions it very briefly: “[H]e (Hanan) took and painted the portrait of Jesus with choice pigments, since he was the king’s artist and brought it with him to his lord King Abgar. When King Abgar saw the portrait he received it with great joy and placed it with great honor in one of the buildings of his palace.”

³³ Aurelio de Santos Otero, “Later Acts of Apostles,” in Wilhelm Schneemelcher *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 481.

³⁴ The results of the analysis will be illustrated in Figure 1.

Since the longest text of the legend is preserved only in the *Teaching of Addai*, our main focus will be on this document. We will do this in two steps, first reviewing the evidence for Christianity in Edessa before the Great Persecution and afterwards looking at the reception of the story in the fourth century.

(A) The Abgar Legend before the Great Persecution

The Abgar story makes sweeping claims about the arrival of Christianity in Edessa. What stands out is not only the mission of one of the apostles but the correspondence between Jesus and the local ruler of a city in Northern Mesopotamia.³⁵ The extravagant character of this claim has led to a considerable effort at historical reconstruction, most of it focused on the early period. There is a vast discrepancy between the events described in the legend and all the other things we know about the early church.³⁶ If we exclude the Abgar legend as a historical source, what we know about Christianity before Constantine is the following:

(1) Abgar the Great (177-212) is mentioned as a Christian in the *Book of the*

³⁵ The presence of a large number of “words of Jesus” in the legend has even led many researchers to place the text in the category ‘gospel material’. See Steven Peterson, “Apocrypha – New Testament Apocrypha” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, s.v. *Apocrypha* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 294-297.

³⁶ Auerbach says about literature in the late antiquity and Middle Ages in general and the conception of reality in particular: “in this conception, an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself, but at the same time another. The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development, but as a oneness within the divine plan, of which all occurrences are parts and reflections.” Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 555.

Laws of Countries, the Syriac tractate attributed to Bardaisan, an unconventional second-century Christian and philosopher from the area.³⁷ It reads: “In Syria and in Edessa people used to cut off their privy parts for Tar’ata (Atargatis); but when King Abgar believed, he gave orders that anyone who cut off his privy parts should have his hand cut off. And from that day until the present no one cuts off his privy parts in the region of Edessa.” Although at first glance this passage is a clear reference to the conversion of Abgar, it is not certain whether or not the crucial phrase “when he believed” is an interpolation. The words are absent from the quotation of the passage by Eusebius³⁸ and this could mean that a Syrian copyist familiar with the *Teaching of Addai* might have added the phrase.³⁹ On the other hand, one should not rule out the possibility that Eusebius might have omitted the crucial phrase on purpose. His motivation would be to preserve the integrity of his account in *Ecclesiastical History* where he links Jesus with Abgar the Black (A.D. 13-50) and not with Abgar the Great (177-222). In any case, the evidence tells us that Bardaisan and his circle, which produced the *Book of the Laws of Countries*, admired Abgar and praised his actions to suppress the practice of self-mutilation. One does not have to be Christian, however, to implement such a decision. What seems to us the most important piece of information implied by the passage is that a Christian group led by Bardaisan must have had a relatively cordial relationship with the ruler and that there was no persecution of Christians by local authorities.

³⁷ The text and ET in William Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum* (London: Rivingtons, 1855).

³⁸ Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* 6.10.44

³⁹ Brock, “Eusebius and Syriac Christianity”, 223.

(2) Julius Africanus is another author who mentions Christianity in Edessa before the Great Persecution. In the *History of the World* he remarks that, while a guest at the court of Abgar the Great in Edessa in 195, he admired the philosopher Bardaisan.⁴⁰ Since this work of Africanus is lost, to retrieve the original words we have to look at the chronicle composed by George Syncellus, a chaplain in Constantinople active around 800. George in his *Εκλογή Χρονογραφίας* 15 quotes Africanus as saying “Abgar, a holy man (ιερός ανήρ), the namesake of the former Abgar, who reigned as king of Edessa.” This testimony, however, is not very reliable; the reference to “the namesake of the former Abgar” seems to be a gloss by George.⁴¹ In sum, we cannot tell whether or not Abgar the Great was a Christian, but we know that there were Christians at his court, in particular Bardaisan.⁴²

(3) Another piece of circumstantial evidence for Christianity in Edessa before the Great Persecution is the reference to the flooding of the Christian Church in the *Chronicle of Edessa*.⁴³ The *Chronicle* can be dated to mid-sixth century.⁴⁴ The catastrophic flood occurred in 202 under the reign of Abgar the Great (177-212) and the entry in the chronicle indicates that the Christian church was destroyed. The *Chronicle* also makes the following references to Christianity in

⁴⁰ *Kestoi*, fragment 1.20, in J. R. Viellefond, *Les Cestes de Julius Africanus* (Firenze, Edizioni Sansoni Antiquariato; Paris: Didier, 1970), 183-85.

⁴¹ Andrew Palmer, “King Abgar, Eusebius, and Constantine” in Hans Bakker ed., *The Sacred Center as the Focus of Political Interest* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1992), 21.

⁴² It should be noted that later Syriac writers like Ephraim harshly criticize Bardaisan for his lack of orthodoxy. He is often classified as a Gnostic.

⁴³ Text of the *Chronicle of Edessa* can be found in *Chronica Minora* ed. by I. Guidi CSCO, *Scriptores Syri* ser. 3, vol. 4, 1893.

⁴⁴ For the date of the chronicle, see W. Witanowski, “Chronicles of Edessa,” *Orientalia Suecana* 33-35 (1984-1986), 487-98.

Edessa prior to the fourth century: (a) expulsion of Marcion “from the Catholic Church” in 137-138 (it is not clear whether local or universal church is meant); and (b) the birth of Bardaisan on July 11, 154. The references to Christianity in Edessa become more detailed only after the arrival of the Bishop Qune who “laid the foundation of the church of Edessa” in 312/313. In short, the *Chronicle of Edessa* gives a clear indication that there were Christians in the city at least since the middle of the second century. It is significant, however, that this important local source does not mention the conversion of Abgar.⁴⁵

(4) Eusebius mentions in the course of his account of the Paschal controversy (c. 190) that there was a synod of churches in “Osroene and the cities there” which produced a letter in support of the accepted position of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus always on Sunday.⁴⁶ This would indicate that not only followers of Marcion or Bardaisan, but also the Catholic Christians were present in Edessa. The phrase, however, has come under suspicion of being an interpolation, because it does not appear in the early translation of *Ecclesiastical History* made by Rufinus c. 402/403.⁴⁷

(5) Of the local Edessan acts of Christian martyrs, two particular texts describe events in the persecution under Trajan and should be considered another possible witness for Christianity in Edessa before the Great Persecution. The *Acts of Sharbel and of Bishop Barsamya* take place “in the fifteenth year of

⁴⁵ Brock, “Eusebius”, 222.

⁴⁶ Eusebius, *His. Ecc.* 5.23.4.

⁴⁷ Sebastian Brock believes that the words are an early interpolation into the extant Greek text of Eusebius. Brock, “Eusebius”, 223. We see no reason to correct the Greek text on the basis on Rufinus’ translation, which often just paraphrases Eusebius.

Trajan Caesar and in the third year of King Abgar.”⁴⁸ The cause of the persecution is the command of the emperor that everyone must offer sacrifice and libation to the gods. Sharbel was a pagan chief priest in Edessa who converted, subsequently refused to sacrifice, and was put to death by a Roman judge. The *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya* specifically mention the conversion of Abgar V, his correspondence with Jesus, and other events and personalities known from the *Teaching of Addai*. Bishop Barsamya urges his pagan counterpart Sharbel not to sacrifice to the idols and says:

These are the things which Palut taught us, with whom you were acquainted in your youth; and you know that Palut was the disciple of Addai the apostle. Abgar the king also, who was older than this Abgar, who himself worshipped idols as well as you, he too believed in the King Christ, the Son of Him whom you call Lord of all the gods.⁴⁹

Although at first sight the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya* seem to confirm the authenticity of the events described in the Abgar legend there are several inconsistencies in the account, all of them arguing against the authenticity of this document. First, the chronology is questionable. The fifteenth year of Trajan and the third year of Abgar could only be A.D. 112-113. At that time Edessa was an independent principality under Parthian sovereignty, so Trajan could not have given order to all the citizens to offer sacrifices under the pain of death penalty.⁵⁰ Trajan's policy toward Christians is well known from Pliny's letters and, although

⁴⁸ The Abgar in question would be Abgar VII bar Ezad (109-116). For the chronology of Edessene kings see the Appendix of my article "Edessa – Parthian Period" in Karen Keck and Norman Redington eds. *The Ecole Initiative: Early Church On-line Encyclopedia* <http://cedar.evansville.edu/~ecoleweb/articles/pedessa.html>

⁴⁹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 8, 677.

⁵⁰ Trajan's order, as represented in the acts, is reminiscent of the fourth edict of Diocletian issued in 304. In it command was given that in several cities all the people should sacrifice. Eusebius, *Martyrs or Palestine*, 3.1.

there were local martyrdoms, there was no universal policy; it was determined on a case-by-case basis and it is generally considered relatively tolerant.⁵¹ Trajan began his wars on the eastern frontier in 114 and entered Edessa in 115. Therefore, the chronology of the *Acts of Sharbel* seems to be off by several years.⁵² Second, Ephraim, who knows about the genuine martyrdoms of Shmona and Gurya, executed in 297, and of the deacon Habbib killed in 309, never mentions Sharbel and Barsamya.⁵³ Third, the calendar of martyrs, preserved in a manuscript written in Edessa in November 411, includes only Shmona, Gurya, and Habbib, making no mention of Sharbel and Barsamya.⁵⁴ Finally, many of the theological arguments in the longer narrative parts of the text use the terminology available only after the council of Nicea. Therefore, one is tempted to conclude that the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya* is a product of the same literary circle that created the Abgar legend. Indications are that this literary circle was active during the fourth century.⁵⁵

⁵¹ A. N. Sherwin White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford: University Press, 1966), 691-712.

⁵² It is, however, interesting to note that from all the emperors in power during the period of Edessene independence 132 B.C. to A.D. 214 only Trajan held the city of Edessa as a Roman dominion. See again my article in the *Early Church On-line Encyclopedia*.

⁵³ *Carmina Nisibena* 33:13

⁵⁴ F. Nau, *Un martyrologie et douze ménologes syriaque* (PO 10/1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1912), 7-26. Habbib, 2 Sept, Shmona and Gurya, 15 Nov.

⁵⁵ The relationship between the *Teaching of Addai*, *Teaching of the Apostles*, and *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya* has often been noted. W Witakowski, "The Origin of the 'Teaching of the Apostles'" in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 229; Rome: Pontificum Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 161-71. All show interest in the nobility of Edessa and the names of several characters appear in all the works. The manuscript tradition also suggests a common circle. M. van Esbroeck, "Le manuscrit syriaque nouvelle série 4 de Leningrad (V^e siècle)" in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont: Contributions à l'études des christianismes orientales* (Cahiers d'Orientalisme 20; Geneva: Patrick Cramer, 1988), 210-219. See also Brock, "Eusebius", 233, note 53.

In sum, there is no clear confirmation either that the events described in the legend ever occurred as narrated in the text or that the account was widely known. This is not surprising, since the legend belongs to the genre of apocryphal apostolic acts. Although we have strong indications that Christianity was present in Edessa after the middle of the second century, beyond that one can say very little about “Christian origins” in Edessa. The legend seems to be a product of creative imagination, and there is no evidence that this creative impulse became operational earlier than the late third or the early fourth century, approximately the time when Eusebius began to write the history of the Church. Furthermore, in the following section we shall see that, as late as the second half of the fourth century, influential Christian leaders in Edessa, like Ephraim Syrus (306-373), are still silent about apostle Addai and his mission.

(B) The Abgar Legend in the Fourth Century

The fourth century is of the foremost importance for the reception of the Abgar legend, because this was the time not only when the legends began to appear in our sources, but also when the outside world started to take notice of the story. It is entirely within the realm of possibility that the legend circulated orally for quite some time before it was written down, but during that time it remained below the “radar screen” of the church. Regardless of who wrote the story and when, the meaning of the text is not limited to the author’s intentions,

but is continually expanded by the process of reception.⁵⁶ This is especially the case when the story becomes popular. We have seen in the previous section that there is very little one can tell about the author(s) and readers of the Abgar legend before the dawn of the fourth century. We now turn to the period where much more information is available.

At the beginning of the fourth century we begin to hear evidence of people telling the story, reading it, hearing it and writing about it. Eusebius declares that in the archives of Edessa he has found the original document verifying the accuracy of the tale. He claims that he used a document from Edessa: “I have extracted from the archives and translated word for word from the Syriac.”⁵⁷ He calls the document ἀνάγραφτος μαρτυρία, or written record. The document, which he also claims to have translated, contained not only the letters of Abgar to Jesus and of Jesus to Abgar, but also additional material.⁵⁸

The question whether or not such a document ever existed was resolved in 1876 when a version in the original Syriac was discovered and published by George Phillips.⁵⁹ The complete text survives in a manuscript from about 500 and is called the *Teaching of Addai*. Several excerpts from the fifth-century

⁵⁶ Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 127.

⁵⁷ *HE* 1.13.5

⁵⁸ Scholars do not suspect the accuracy of Eusebius’ statement, but they doubt that he actually translated the document from original Syriac. See Brock, “Eusebius”, 213.

⁵⁹ G. Phillips, *The Doctrine of Addai the Apostle, with an English Translation and Notes* (London: Trubner and Co., 1876). As the basis of his edition Phillips uses the sixth century manuscript from the public library in St. Petersburg, in addition to two fragments from the British Library published earlier by William Cureton in *Ancient Syriac Documents* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864). Philip Schaff uses the term ‘discovery’. It does not seem to be the appropriate term, since the story was well known both in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. See Philip Schaff ed, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, reprint (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1952), 100.

manuscripts also survive beside the one complete manuscript.⁶⁰ There is also a papyrus fragment of the Greek version, indicating the early popularity and the international appeal of the legend.⁶¹

Between the beginning of the fourth century, when Eusebius wrote down the legend, and the emergence of the earliest extant Syriac manuscript early in the fifth century, stands the most important period in the reception of the Abgar legend. The relationship between these two documents, the account in *Ecclesiastical History* and in the *Teaching of Addai*, is of the utmost importance for tracing its reception history. If we want to track down how the legend was received during this crucial period, we need to analyze carefully the relationship between these two sources.

In addition to the reception “trajectory” described above, there is another “trajectory” worth pursuing.⁶² At the end of the fourth century Egeria, a pilgrim from the western parts of the Roman Empire, visited Edessa. She wrote an account of her journey to Egypt, the Holy Land, Syria, Upper Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and Constantinople.⁶³ While considerably shorter, the version recorded by Egeria is notably different from the one in Eusebius and the *Teaching of Addai*. The main difference is that in Egeria’s narrative, Jesus sends Thomas to

⁶⁰ Photographic reproduction of this manuscript is available in N. Meshtcherskaya, *Legenda ob Avgare, Rennesiriskij literaturnyj pamjatnik*, Moscow, 1984.

⁶¹ R. Peppermüller, “Griechische Papyrusfragmente der Doctrina Addai”, VC 25 (1971), 289-310.

⁶² “At one stage a document may function in a specific way; at a subsequent stage on the trajectory that document, unaltered, may function in a different way.” For more on “trajectories” see James Robinson, “The Dismantling and Reassembling of the Categories of New Testament Scholarship” in Koester and Robinson, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 16.

⁶³ *Itinerarium Egeriae*, Sources Chrétiennes, no. 296 (Paris: Les Editions du CERF, 1982).

evangelize Edessa, while Thaddeus/Addai is not mentioned. In fact, Egeria takes a detour from her journey to visit Edessa, because she “wanted to make a pilgrimage to the *martyrium* (shrine) of the holy apostle Thomas, where his entire body is buried.”⁶⁴

Therefore, the reception of the Abgar legend took place along two main trajectories, the one represented by Eusebius and the *Teaching of Addai*, the other by the report given by Egeria. We will follow each of these trajectories in the two following sections. First, we will analyze the relationship between the précis of the story given by Eusebius and its fullest and most comprehensive account presented in the *Teaching of Addai*. The main goal will be to reconstruct the process of reception. Then we will turn to the diary of Egeria and follow the reception of the Abgar legend along that trajectory. Egeria’s report is not an account of the story, but rather a report of the story telling. Egeria wrote down what a local bishop told her. As a report of the oral transmission, Egeria’s version is very different from the written narratives in Eusebius and the *Teaching of Addai* and indicates how volatile was the legend at the end of the fourth century.

(B1) The *Teaching of Addai* and Eusebius

In spite of the claim of its author, the *Teaching of Addai* is a composite document. To the backbone of the story presented in Eusebius the author (or his circle) added many larger episodes and also changed several smaller details

⁶⁴ *Itinerarium Egeriae*, 7.17.1-2

within in episode. Furthermore, the episodes already mentioned in Eusebius are presented with many details about local conditions, details that must have been naturally omitted from the history circulated in the wider church. (A graphic illustration of these changes can be found in Figure 1.)

First of all, unlike the document in Eusebius, the *Teaching of Addai* is not an anonymous record taken from the archives but a literary work written by an author conscious of his creative role. At the end of the story the author, “Labubna”, writes the following:

Labubna, the son of Senaq, the son of Abshadar, the scribe of the king, therefore, wrote the things concerning the apostle Addai from the beginning to the end, while Hanan, the honorable secretary of the king, set the hand of witness and placed it among the records of the royal archives where the statutes and ordinance are put.⁶⁵

Although “Labubna” wants to assure his audience that the account is homogeneous, reliable, and genuine, the *Teaching of Addai* is not a unified tale. It is a conglomerate of stories taken from a variety of sources. What keeps the collection together is not the skilled literary hand of the author, but the main characters, the apostle Addai and the king Abgar. Some of tales from the collection can be found in the account given by Eusebius and some cannot. In the following we will go through the *Teaching of Addai* in order to list and comment upon the differences between the Syriac version and Eusebius, hoping to reconstruct as much as possible the reception of the legend in the fourth century. A summary of the finding will be also presented graphically at the end of this chapter. The text itself is not divided into verses or paragraphs, but

⁶⁵ TA 103. In order to locate the passage in the *Teaching of Addai* I will follow Desreumaux’ division into paragraphs. Alain Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Adgar et de Jésus* (Belgium: Brepols Apocryphes, 1993).

Desreumaux suggested the division into 103 paragraphs.⁶⁶ Since this division closely follows the Syriac and simplifies citations, we will follow it here.

The text of the *Teaching of Addai* (TA hereafter) begins not with the title, but with a short summary. The title can be found at the end, as it is usual in Syriac literature. In Syriac the title is מלפנותא דאדי שליחא, which means “the teaching of Addai the apostle.”⁶⁷ The word מלפנותא is usually translated as “the teaching,” but there are problems with this translation. It is derived from the root אלפ which as Peal (ילפ) means “to learn” and as Pael (אלפ) “to teach.” One often finds the word מלפנא, translated as “the teacher” in Syriac literature. For example St. Ephraim is often called מלפנא רבא, “the great teacher.”⁶⁸ The word “teacher” includes two aspects, the passing on of knowledge associated with theoretical activities and the acquisition of skills by imitation associated with arts and crafts. Since Syriac literature is, by and large, a product of Syriac holy men who were not, as a rule, great theologians, “the teacher” represents not only someone who imparts knowledge but also someone whose deeds the student is supposed to imitate. We suggest that the title “the teaching of Addai” should be understood more in its transitive sense of “doing the deeds.” The meaning of the title is closer to something like “the didactical deeds of Addai,” than to the intransitive meaning of the word teacher, namely “the scholarship of Addai.” In other words, the title

⁶⁶ In the French translation of the *Teaching of Addai* Desreumaux presents the most up-to-date analysis of the variants in the manuscript tradition. See Alain Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Adgar et de Jésus* (Belgium: Brepols Apocryphes, 1993).

⁶⁷ In writing Syriac, we will use the Aramaic script in order to make the Syriac writings more accessible to a wider audience.

⁶⁸ See George Kiraz, *The Syriac Primer*, JSOT Manuals 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 124.

indicates that the *TA* is a collection of stories related to the apostle Addai. The *Teaching of Addai* is not only a piece of historical fiction, but also a didactic document intended to edify Christians in Edessa about their past.

The summary with which the *TA* opens, gives us a good indication about its purpose. It reads: “the letter⁶⁹ of king Abgar, son of king Manu, which he had sent to our Lord to Jerusalem, about the time when the apostle Addai came to him to Edessa, about what he said in his preaching to those who received ordination from him to the priesthood when he departed from this world.” The summary leaves no doubt about what the purpose of the text is, namely, to establish the apostolic origins of Christianity in Edessa by linking the priesthood in the city to the apostle Addai, Jesus and king Abgar.

Paragraphs 1-3 give us historical circumstances surrounding Abgar’s decision to send a letter to Jesus. Both Eusebius (1.13.1-5) and the *TA* speak about a delegation sent by Abgar to Jesus. The rationale, however, is stated differently. Eusebius says that a certain (unidentified) disease afflicted Abgar, and after he had heard about the healing power of Jesus he sought relief from him. On the other hand, the *TA* opens with Abgar sending a delegation to Sabinus, the procurator of “our lord Caesar” and the governor of “Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and the country of Mesopotamia.”⁷⁰ This kind of opening clearly sets the tone for the whole text. In the *TA* Edessa and its ruler are presented as friends of the

⁶⁹ The word used here is אנרתא which means letter or writings. The author uses the same word as the one used for the letter in Ezra 4:8.

⁷⁰ Syriac uses the Greek loan word “ἐπαύροπος”, which translates the Latin “procurator.” Neither procurators or nor governors ever had jurisdiction of all the Near East. Maximin Daia as a tetrarch had this kind of jurisdiction.

Romans. The delegation brings to Sabinus letters about the affairs of Edessa.

The governor resides in Eleutheropolis, a village in Palestine forty miles southwest of Jerusalem.⁷¹ After the official business is concluded, the delegation passes through Jerusalem and, by chance, runs into the Messiah.

The historical introduction that opens the story claims that eyewitnesses have recorded the events narrated. “Hanan, the secretary of Abgar, wrote down everything he saw.”⁷² The report is then presented to the king in Edessa, who immediately wishes to cross over into the “land of the Romans” to protect the Savior from “the plotting of the Jews.” Out of respect for the Roman Caesar, Abgar decides to send a letter to Jesus and to offer him a safe haven.

Paragraph 4 presents the copy of the letter of Abgar to Jesus. Eusebius (1.13.6-9) quotes the letter in full and there are no differences between the two versions. Hanan the archivist brings the letter to Jesus. The author of *TA* gives the exact date of the letter, timing it a few days before the crucifixion. He tries to connect the events in the story with the Acts of Apostles 5:34, and therefore when Hanan brings the letter to Jesus he receives it in the house of Gamaliel, a prince of the Jews. Eusebius fails to mention Hanan, the secretary of the king, speaking only of “the bearer of the letter” (ἐπιστολοφόρος). The Syriac version uses the Latin

⁷¹ Eleutheropolis was never the seat of Roman governor. Roman martyrology associates the village with the preaching of Annanias, a Jewish converted by Paul in Damascus. Church historians place there the martyrdom of a certain Peter Abshalom. Both names are mentioned in the *TA*. Abshalom is one of the deacons ordained by Addai; Hanan was the archivist of Abgar. According to Desreumaux this indicate that the origins of the legend may go back to the late 2nd century, because Septimius Severus visited the village in 199 and changed its name from Beth Gouvrin to Eleuteropolis. See Desreumaux, *Histoire*, 123-24.

⁷² The author of the text is mentioned at the end: “Labubna, the scribe of the king, wrote the things concerning the apostle Addai from the beginning to the end, while Hanan, the faithful archivist of the king, set the hand of witnesses and placed it among the records of the royal archives.” *TA* 103.

loan word תבולרא and Eusebius seems have confused *tabularius*, the secretary, with *tabellarius*, the courier.⁷³ We have noted before that the *TA* pays much more attention to details relevant on the local level, such as the official title of the king's secretary. Otherwise, no significant differences exist.

What is more peculiar is that Eusebius barely mentions Hanan, or Ananias in Greek. His name appears only very briefly in the title and he is just a courier or ταχυδρόμος, not a higher official at Abgar's court. Hanan features prominently in the *TA* and also in the later *Acts of Thaddeus* as Ananias. In both narratives his role is to "guarantee" the authenticity of the text. He is the one who "set the hand of witness and placed it [the text] among the records of the royal archives."⁷⁴

Egeria also mentions Ananias in the same role. This is a very important testimony, because Egeria's account is very short. Egeria believed that even in her short report she should mention Ananias. When she explains the reasons for her visit to Edessa, she says: "It is at Edessa, to which Jesus, our God, was sending Thomas after his ascension into heaven, as he tells us in the letter he sent to King Abgar by the messenger Ananias."⁷⁵ Egeria is also shown the city gate that Ananias passed through carrying the letter.⁷⁶ Is it possible that Eusebius does not know the name of the person who brings the letter to Jesus, or that he glosses over his name on purpose? One has to bear in mind that the exchange of letters takes place immediately preceding the trial of Jesus. It

⁷³ *Tabulara*, the secretary or the archivist was an important official with the status of *Sharrira*. He was a member of local nobility. In Roman civic administration this is equivalent to the rank of *decurio*, member of the local *curia*. He counted among the *honestiores*.

⁷⁴ *TA* 103.

⁷⁵ *Itinerarium Egeriae* 17.1.

⁷⁶ *ibid.* 19.16-18.

belongs to a stream of early Christian traditions found in several apocryphal Passion Gospels. Eusebius is aware of many of these traditions, such as the apocryphal correspondence between Pilate and Tiberius.⁷⁷ Because Eusebius is not reluctant to include other such traditions, such as the obviously fictitious correspondence between Pilate and Tiberius, we tend to believe that Hanan/Ananias was not prominent in his sources. It is interesting that a person of the same name, Ananias, appears also in the *Acts of Pilate* as the main guarantor of authenticity, the same role Hanan has in the *TA*. The passage from the *Acts of Pilate* can be dated to 425 C.E., and that could give an indication that Ananias, the official of the king, was not in the narrative early in the fourth century.⁷⁸ This development indicates what happened to the legend during the process of its reception. Minor characters barely mentioned in an earlier version became very important in the later versions.

Paragraph 5 gives the response of Jesus. While Eusebius quotes the letter of Jesus, the *TA* has Jesus responding orally to the messenger of the king. In both cases the wording is the same, but the *TA* indirectly underlines that there was no letter.⁷⁹ Jesus speaks in Johannine idiom and the message itself consists of cut-and-paste fragments from the fourth gospel. The difference indicates that not

⁷⁷ *HE* 1.9, 2.2, 2.6, 5.7, 9.5. *TA* 74-76 also contains the correspondence between Abgar and Tiberius, but Eusebius never mentions it.

⁷⁸ "I [Ananias] found these acts in the Hebrew letters and ... I translated them into Greek ... in the reign of our Lord Flavius Theodosius, in the seventeenth year, and of Flavius Theodosius the sixth, in the ninth indiction." Theodosius II ascended the throne on May 1, 408. Valentinianus III became Augustus in 425, but bore the title *Nobilissimus*, which he received on February 8, 421. For the chronology see I Cazzaniga 'Osservazioni critiche al testo del 'prologo' del Vangelo di Nicodemo', *Rendiconti del Istituto Lombardo – Accademia di Scienze e Lettere* 102, Milan 1968, 535-548.

⁷⁹ At this point the *TA* inserts the words, "Go and say to you lord (Abgar) who has sent you to my presence."

everyone in Edessa was familiar with the letter, and yet Egeria, who traveled to the city in 384, was shown the letter. In light of her report, where the letter takes center stage, the silence of the *TA* is more surprising. Were some circles in Edessa directly opposed to the letter? We have no firm evidence, but Segal speculates that the adoration of the letter comes from circles linked to the Jewish tradition of adoration of the scripture.⁸⁰ If accurate, this would confirm the tendency toward anti-Judaism in the *TA*.

The other difference is that the *TA* adds an additional sentence to the words of Jesus: “As for your city may it be blessed and may no enemy ever again rule over it.” We can be sure that this sentence was not present in the Syriac document before Eusebius. Its presupposition is that while Edessa had once been under the rule of the Persians, it no longer is.

A brief review of political history is in order to clarify this assurance given by Jesus to the citizens of Edessa. In the 260s the city fell to Shapur I (242-272) after a long period of independence. In 298 Roman forces under the personal direction of Diocletian won back Mesopotamia and the area stayed firmly in Roman hands, until Jovian (363-364) was forced to cede to the Persians all the territory east of the Khabur River, but not Edessa itself. By this treaty the frontier between the two empires was sharply defined. Nearby Nisibis became a Persian stronghold. From that time onward and up to the fall of Edessa to the armies of Islam in 639, the city was the principal military fortress of the Romans in this

⁸⁰ Segal, *Edessa*, 73-77.

region. In spite of the numerous sieges⁸¹ undertaken between 363 and 639, the Persians never managed to capture it.⁸² We can be certain, therefore, that the sentence could have been added only after 363 and that Eusebius's copy of the *Early Syriac Version* did not have this phrase.

Paragraph 6 preserves the tradition about how Hanan, the faithful archivist of the king, painted a portrait of Jesus and brought it to Edessa. The passage is not present in Eusebius. The *Teaching of Addai* mentions the portrait, while Eusebius and, later on, Egeria mention the letter of Jesus. The discrepancy calls for an answer; it is very difficult to tell whether Eusebius omitted mention of the portrait because of his dislike of images⁸³ or it was later added to the *Teaching of Addai*.⁸⁴ Egeria, the pilgrim who visited Edessa in 384 searching for "Christian antiquities," says nothing about the portrait. In subsequent centuries the image will play a much more important role in the reception process; we tend to believe that the reference to the image was added to the text of the *Teaching of Addai*.⁸⁵

We know that the image of Jesus was bound to play a much larger role in the subsequent history of reception. The image miraculously appeared for the first time publicly during the siege of Edessa by Chosroes I (531-579) the Persian,

⁸¹ Chronicle of *Joshua the Stylite* described the siege in 503. He believed that its failure, in spite of the overwhelming Persian military superiority, meant that the words of Christ have been fulfilled.

⁸² Except in 609 when Chosroes II (590-628) successfully invaded the Roman East. Heraclius (610-641) was able to take Edessa back in 628 only to surrender it to the Arabs in 639.

⁸³ Steven Runciman, "Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa" *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3 (1929-1931), 238-52. *Contra* Robert Drews, *In Search of the Shroud of Turin* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld Publishers, 1984), 72-73.

⁸⁴ Drews, *Shroud of Turin*, 72-73 and Brock "Eusebius", n. 6.

⁸⁵ The fullest account on the reception of legend about the image of Jesus is E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* (TU 18, n.F. 3; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899).

which took place in 544. Writing immediately after the event Procopius describes the siege in detail. He ascribes the Roman success over the Persians to the courage and resourcefulness of the defenders, while Evagrius the chronicler, writing fifty years after Procopius, believes that the defeat of the Persians was the work of the sacred portrait of Jesus.⁸⁶ In conclusion we must say that the portrait of Jesus began to play a role in the reception process of the Abgar legend only after the middle of the sixth century. It seems very unlikely that Eusebius purposefully excluded the reference to the portrait.

Paragraphs 7-15 describe the arrival of the apostle Addai in Edessa, his introduction to the court of Abgar, the miracles accomplished there, and a short sermon to courtiers. While the précis in *Ecclesiastical History* closely follows the Syriac narrative, the *Teaching of Addai* introduces a large group of local characters barely or never mentioned by Eusebius. Details about local issues and characters are hardly appropriate for the history of the universal Church. Perhaps they were added or invented later, or Eusebius simply omitted them for the sake of brevity.

The most important of these local men of distinguished spirit is "Tobias, the son of Tobias the Jew, who was from Palestine." Eusebius mentions him, but just as a name. *TA* casts him in a more important role. He is the one who hosts the apostle in his house and Tobias is more than just a host to a stranger. His house becomes the base for Addai's missionary activities. Desreumaux believes that this Tobias is the same man as the hero of the biblical book Tobit and that the

⁸⁶ Segal, *Edessa*, 76-7.

author has intentionally placed the character in the times of Jesus.⁸⁷ While this might or might not be the case, the fact that Tobias is a Jew from Palestine seems to us more important. The author would like to underline the contrast between the Jews living in Edessa and those in Palestine. The one group helps the disciple of Christ, the other bears responsibility for crucifying the Messiah. Very often the author, “Labubna”, treats Palestinian Jews with contempt, but inclusion of Tobias in the plot indicates that, on the local level, the relationship between Jewish and Christian communities was not hostile in spite of several outbursts of anti-Judaism in the text. Further below we shall see that in the city of Edessa, traditional cults and Judaism were forces to be reckoned with.

Paragraphs 16-32 contain a story within the story, a feature very common in Syriac and later Arabic literature. Following the same pattern, Addai tells a story about Protonice, the wife of Claudius Caesar, and her finding of the True Cross, placed in the context of the sermon to the courtiers.⁸⁸ The intercalated story is seamlessly woven into the fabric of the whole sermon to the courtiers. The story is obviously based on the famous pilgrimage of Helena, the mother of Constantine, to the Holy Land.⁸⁹ In the *TA* the role of Helena is played by the much earlier wife of Claudius.⁹⁰ Protonice is an example of how faith can change

⁸⁷ Desreumaux, *Histoire*, 134.

⁸⁸ In the West the legend of the Finding of the True Cross arrived by way of the writings of Rufinus and Ambrose. See Ambrose, *In Ob. Theod.* 46 and Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 7-8. This version attributes the finding to Helena, the mother of Constantine.

⁸⁹ Helena traveled to the Holy Land in the aftermath of Constantine's defeat of Licinius in September 324. Eusebius reports about her pilgrimage in *Vita Const.* 3.42.46, but does not mention the finding of the “True Cross.”

⁹⁰ Not on one occasion in late antiquity, pious empresses were addressed as a new Helena. For example at Chalcedon in 451 the bishops acclaimed the emperor Marcian as a ‘new Constantine’ and his consort Pulcheria as a ‘new Helena.’ *Acts Conc. Oec.* 2.1.2. (1933), 155.

a believer, and how worthwhile it is to believe even for the people who do not lack material goods. The episode also tells us something about the social status of “Labubna’s” audience. To an attentive audience of royal neophytes Addai talks about the wife of a Roman Caesar as a paradigm of faith. In addition to the king and other courtiers, a man named Augustine, Abgar’s mother, and Shalmath, the wife of Abgar, were listening to the sermon.

An anachronism in this intercalated story helps us to date it with some precision. While the author’s knowledge of history is certainly limited, he knows very basic chronology. The writer very often emphasizes that Tiberius was the emperor contemporaneous with Abgar. Even Abgar himself mentions how he wanted to rush to Judea to prevent the execution of Jesus but would not do it out of reverence for “the covenant between him and his fathers and the lord Caesar Tiberius.” A more careful reading reveals that the author assumes the system of tetrarchy introduced by Diocletian (284-305) and believes that it was already in place in the times of Tiberius (14-37) and Claudius (41-54).⁹¹

Our author possesses a limited knowledge of the past but uses it in a very peculiar way. For example, he knows about the expulsion of Jews from Italy under Claudius, probably from the Acts of the Apostles (13:2), but he attributes that decision to the influence of Protonice on Claudius. “Labubna” is trying to complement the New Testament. He says that after the finding of the “True Cross,” the queen was so outraged at the Jews that she demanded that the emperor expel the Jews from Italy. The anachronism reveals the limits of the

⁹¹ The writer uses royal titles with great consistency. Abgar is always the king נאֵרֵם, Tiberius נאֵרֵם, and Claudius נאֵרֵם. In Latin the titles are *Augustus* and *Caesar*.

author's knowledge of history, but it also reveals one of the most important literary strategies of the narrative. By using the past as the backdrop, the *Teaching of Addai* speaks about contemporary events. The presence of Jews in Edessa might have been a bigger problem for "Labubna," if only by refusal to convert to Christianity, than he is willing to admit.

Eusebius does not mention the finding of the True Cross anywhere else in his opus, nor does he include the intercalated story in his précis of the Abgar legend. We are facing the same question again: Has Eusebius omitted the passage or has the author of the *Teaching of Addai* attached it to the narrative? The legend of the Finding of the True Cross exists in several versions. It became very popular in the fourth century. The Protonice version preserved in the *TA* was preferred in Syria and Armenia.⁹² In most other areas we find the version that ascribes the finding to Helena, the mother of Constantine.⁹³ Eusebius says nothing about any of the versions, although he describes at length the discovery of Christ's tomb and the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher by Constantine.⁹⁴ In any case, the writing of the *Ecclesiastical History* occurred before 313 and certainly before the beginning of Constantine's building activities

⁹² Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 147.

⁹³ This version can be found in the *Church Histories* of Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret. Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, and Sulcius Severus preserve also the text of the legend.

⁹⁴ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, III 25ff.

in Jerusalem.⁹⁵ Without entering the debate on the finding of the “True Cross,” we must conclude that the Protonice story was not present in the Syriac text of Eusebius and has been added to the *Teaching of Addai* at some point during the fourth century.⁹⁶

One wonders why the author chooses the wife of Claudius (41-54 CE) for the role, and not, for example, the wife of Tiberius (14-37 CE). The emperor appears as a character in the legend; why introduce another? The author of the *TA* believes that the sojourn of Simon Peter in Rome corresponds with the reign of Claudius. He makes the wife of Claudius contemporary with Simon Peter, because it is Peter who converts Protonice. We can now begin to piece together the strategy of the author. The Protonice legend projects back in the distant past contemporary stories surrounding Pope Sylvester I, Constantine, and Helena. In the *Teaching of Addai*, the roles of Sylvester, Constantine, and Helena are played by Simon Peter, Tiberius, and Protonice. The key for this reinterpretation of past events is given by the apostle Addai himself. He begins the Protonice story by addressing the courtiers saying: “I will tell you that which happened and what things were done for people who, like you, believed in the Messiah.” Addai admonishes the courtiers to follow the example of Protonice for their own benefit. On the other hand Protonice is modeled after Helena, the mother of Constantine,

⁹⁵ Walker and Jan Drijvers believe that Eusebius is silent about the “True Cross” for theological reasons. He preferred the Resurrection. In our opinion they put too much emphasis on the statements of Cyril of Jerusalem and try to explain away the silence of *HE* and *VC* on the true Cross. In a letter written in 351 addressed to Constantius II Cyril claims that the “True Cross” was found during the reign of Constantine. Jan Willem Drijvers, *Hellena Augusta* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 81-93. P. W. L. Walker *Holy City Holy Places Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁹⁶ Sebastian Brock believes that the story is a later insertion, because it presupposes a Christian building on the site of Golgotha. Brock, “Eusebius”, 214.

and what Addai tells to the courtiers is to become like Helena Augusta. This literary strategy provides a further indication that “Labubna” wants to emphasize the connection between Christians in Edessa and in Rome. One also has to bear in mind that during the fourth century, Christians were not a majority population in the area.⁹⁷

The Protonice episode ends by mentioning James, the brother of Jesus. He serves as a guarantor of the accuracy of the story. “Labubna” writes: “James the leader of the church in Jerusalem, who has seen the event with his own eyes, wrote about it and sent word to my fellow apostle in the cities of their districts.”

Paragraphs 33-35 tell about the reaction of the king, the queen, and all the courtiers to the Protonice story. All became believers. King Abgar, with newfound zeal, calls the whole city to the meeting in order to hear the teaching of the apostle. It also lists a number of notables, including the author “Labubna.” Most of them have theophoric names like Ebedshamash, Bar Calbo,⁹⁸ showing their respect for and dedication to the popular local gods. The author wants the readers to be prepared for the public sermon of Addai, the main thrust of which will be directed again the errors of paganism. Eusebius makes no reference to any of the persons involved. If their role is not purely symbolic, their relevance for the story must have been known locally.

⁹⁷ Egeria, who visited the area in 384, writes that the countryside was still pagan. See John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1999), 138. See also Trombley, Frank R. *Hellenistic Religions and Christianization c. 370-529*, vols. 1 and 2. Religions in the Greco-Roman World 115/1-2, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).

⁹⁸ Bar Calbo means “son of the dog.” Dog is attested as a companion of a local god. See Alain Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Adgar et de Jésus* (Belgium: Brepols Apocryphes, 1993), 74.

Paragraphs 36-61 contain the sermon of Addai to all the citizens of Edessa. After establishing his credentials as an apostle, Addai can begin the work of evangelizing the people of Edessa. First his credibility was enhanced by the recommendations directly from Thomas and Jesus. This was followed by success at the court of the well-inclined king Abgar. Third, in the Protonice story, Addai did not fail to mention his good relationship with James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the mother of all churches in Jerusalem. All these claims indicate that there was a strong connection between Christians in Edessa and the churches in Palestine. The sermon of Addai serves a transitional function in the narrative, leading the readers from a much larger stage of world politics to a narrower local plane. It is at this point that the narrative of Eusebius breaks off, ending with the plan of Addai to preach to the whole city. It is conceivable that Eusebius for the sake of brevity does not quote this long sermon but that his source has recorded the sermon.⁹⁹ It is just as reasonable to conclude that the Syriac source of Eusebius breaks off at this point, because none of the events that follow are reported by Eusebius.

The author directs the sermon toward Jews and Gentiles living in the city in his own time. Its purpose is the defense of Christian religion against the challenge from competing practices. It shares many of the same tools with other works of early Christian apologetic literature. While the outcome in the narrative is the conversion of the whole city, the fact that apologetic material is so abundant indicates that both Judaism and local pagan religion were very popular

⁹⁹ Brock, "Eusebius", 214.

in Edessa. If, as we are assuming, the *TA* reflects the situation at the time of its writing, that is, at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, it may be surprising that the author acknowledges the vigor of both paganism and Judaism.¹⁰⁰ The apostle Addai uses “proofs” from the prophets very often and, trying out a bold rhetorical device, he calls the Jews in the audience to determine whether or not his quotation from the prophets is accurate. On the other hand, Addai directs the larger part of the sermon to gentiles. He includes many references to local pagan deities and emphasizes the power of the creator God, greater than all creatures. We will briefly review the main points of the sermon, because they reflect well the concerns and the challenges of the Edessan Christians in the fourth century.

First of all, Christianity is presented as the only universal religion, not the religion of a particular group. God was crucified for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. For that reason, people like Addai, who “were Hebrews and knew only the Hebrew language, with which they were born, today speak in all languages.” In that context, Addai paints a contrast between his birth in Paneas, “the place where the Jordan River flows forth,” and his mission, which brought him to a faraway place like Edessa. It is right to abandon the “faith of the fathers” and believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, says the apostle. Addai also makes some political promises. He says that everyone will learn how to read and write,

¹⁰⁰ The *TA* is roughly contemporary with the most famous work of Christian apologetic literature, Augustine’s *City of God*. Addai’s sermon also resembles the writings of earlier apologists, like Justin or Tertullian, reflecting the time when Christians were still facing an uphill battle. Judaism was very powerful in Mesopotamia. Aphrahat, a fourth century Christian polemicist who lived on the Persian side of the border where the Jews were a much larger group, testifies to the importance of Judaism for Christians in the area. See Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism* (Studia Post-Biblica 19; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971).

because on the day of judgment “everyone will read the writings of his own book.”¹⁰¹ This is not just a promise for the future, but also a challenge to contemporaneous paganism as the religion of the illiterate. Using imagery known to the readers of the Hebrew Bible, Addai calls the addressees the descendants of the people of Babel in the area where God first confounded the languages. In other words, Addai makes the church not only a universal community, but also a progressive community, the community capable of overcoming the relative isolation of a frontier city lying far from the centers of power.

The orthodoxy of the sermon cannot be challenged, and it reflects the post-Nicene doctrine that the Son is co-eternal with the Father. Some passages are so clearly anti-Arian that some connection with Apollinarianism could be conjectured, as in the passage, “although his appearance was human, his power, intellect, and authority was divine,” which clearly reflects the argument that Logos took the place of human spirit in Jesus.¹⁰² A passage such as this gives an indication, but not enough evidence to show a serious connection with the heretical teachings condemned in 381 at the council in Constantinople.¹⁰³ On the

¹⁰¹ TA 49 gives a very good illustration why it can be said that the Church created Syriac literature: “Their bodies will become parchments skins for the books of justice. There will be no one there who cannot read, because in that day everyone will read the writings of his own book. Moreover, the unlearned will know the new writing of the new language. No one will say to his companions: ‘Read this for me,’ because teaching and instruction will rule over all people.”

¹⁰² Apollinarius was a champion of anti-Arian cause in Syria. Arianism took hold in Edessa only during the later phases of the controversy. *The Chronicle of Edessa* reports (31-33) that in 373 an Arian group took possession of the church in the city and held it for five years.

¹⁰³ Apollinarius (d. 392) was the bishop of Laodicea in Syria, the city standing two hundred miles west from Edessa, but he lived a world apart in Greek speaking Syria. Laodicea was the most important seaport of Greek-speaking Syria, a world apart from Edessa. Although the strongest Hellenistic city of the frontier land, Edessa lies on the other side of Euphrates Rives surrounded by Arab nomads and hostile enemy, the Persians. On the division between Greek and Aramaic/Syriac speaking areas see Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

other hand, the anti-Arian tendency confirms the interest of “Labubna” in the political and ecclesiastical struggles of the fourth century.

The main point of the sermon is an admonition against idolatry. Much valuable information about paganism in upper Mesopotamia can be gathered from the sermon.¹⁰⁴ The most important gods in the city were Bel and Nebo, while Shamash, Sin, and Tar’atha (Atargatis) are mentioned as gods of cities nearby.¹⁰⁵ The worship of heavenly powers and astral deities, a distinctive characteristic of the Mesopotamian religion, is often criticized by the apostle.¹⁰⁶ According to Addai the earthquake and the solar eclipse that occurred during the crucifixion of Jesus are the best proofs that Jesus is the Lord of created powers, on earth and in heaven.

Paragraphs 62-67 describe the reaction of the people to the apostle’s sermon. Surprisingly, the citizens of Edessa, who gathered in the public square at the king’s call, say nothing. It is again Abgar and the nobles who speak. They react positively to the sermon and use this opportunity to reaffirm their faith before the people. We hear of individual conversions from the ranks of the nobility, but not from the citizens. The first to react to Addai’s sermon is the king. He promises to continue to believe in the Messiah, along with his family, “as long as he lives.” He gives permission to the apostle to build a church in the city. Next the nobles from the king’s entourage are mentioned as giving offerings to the

¹⁰⁴ H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980).

¹⁰⁵ Bel and Nebo were traditional Mesopotamian (Babylonian) gods. Shamash, Sin, and Atargatis represent a triad of Arabic deities represented by the sun, moon, and the planet Venus. See Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, s.v. “Arabian Gods” (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 35.

¹⁰⁶ Like the rest of Mesopotamia, Edessans worshiped astral deities. See Segal, *Edessa*, 43-61.

church, indicating that one of the purposes of the work was to inspire patronage. Two noblemen, Avida and Bar Calbo, want to hear more about the Messiah and inquire of the apostle how it is possible to see God.¹⁰⁷ The high priests of the city, Shavida and Ebednebo, run hastily to the altars upon which they have been sacrificing and tear them down. The text records how they destroyed all the altars, except for “the great high place which was in the midst of the city,” indicating probably that this high place still stood in the middle of Christian Edessa at the time of writing. Both high priests are baptized and become the disciples of Addai. Finally some Jews are converted also: “the Jews who were learned in the Law and the Prophets, who traded in silk, submitted and became followers.”

The success of the sermon is presented as overwhelming, but even “Labubna” gives more than one indication that it was far from complete. “Neither king Abgar nor the apostle Addai forced anyone by constraint to believe,” says “Labubna” at the end of the passage. We know from other sources that, although a majority in the city itself became Christian, the countryside remained pagan well into the sixth century.¹⁰⁸ For example, the *Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite* records that pagans still celebrated their spring festival as late as 496 and 498.¹⁰⁹ We cannot be sure that pagan festivities were finally suppressed when in 502 Emperor Anastasius issued a decree forbidding pagan public performances,

¹⁰⁷ Bar Calbo and Avida are also mentioned in the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya*, the work coming from the same literary cycle as the *TA*.

¹⁰⁸ In 384 Egeria writes that not a single Christian lived in the neighboring Haran or Carrae, the city which was the main pagan rival of Edessa. See *Itinerarium Egeriae* 20.7-22.1.

¹⁰⁹ W. Wright, *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite* (Cambridge: University Press, 1882).

because Procopius writes that most of the citizens of the nearby city of Carrhae were pagans as late as the middle of the sixth century.¹¹⁰

Paragraphs 68-71 speak about the establishment of the Christian Church in Edessa; the emphasis is placed on Addai's successors at the episcopal throne. All came out of the ranks of nobility. The first was Aggai, "who made regal silks and tiaras" and who succeeded Addai on his death. Second came Palut, who succeeded Aggai. Abshelomo and Barsamya are also mentioned as Addai's disciples, but the text tells us nothing about when they became bishops. Two bishops of Edessa bear the name Abshelomo, but we know nothing else about them. Barsamya is the protagonist of the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya*. He is not the first character featured in both the *Teaching of Addai* and the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya*, since these two works come from the same literary cycle.¹¹¹ Above we have mentioned the noblemen Bar Calbo and Avida. In that piece of literature Barsamya is described as the bishop of Edessa who was executed during the reign of Trajan (98-117) while Abgar VII (109-116) was the king of Edessa. None of these names is ever mentioned by Eusebius.

A second important feature of this section is the description of the church, "which Addai had built by the word and commandment of King Abgar." The church was supported by the gifts from the nobility. There were daily readings of the Old Testament and of the Diatessaron (probably vespers and matins are meant). The faithful gave alms to the sick and buried their dead in a Christian cemetery. Furthermore, we hear that in the areas around the city other churches

¹¹⁰ Procopius, *Wars* 2.13.7.

¹¹¹ Brock, "Eusebius", 223.

were built and many were ordained to priesthood. All this paints a picture of fourth-century Christianity in Edessa seeking the patronage of local nobility.

The news about the Christian community in Edessa reached even across the border to Persia, and paragraphs 72-73 describe how the mission to Assyria was organized. “Labubna” says that people from neighboring Assyria, when they heard about the signs which Addai had been doing, “came into the territory of the Romans in the disguise of merchants.” They were ordained by Addai and sent back to Assyria, where they were given a task to organize communities of crypto-Christians. “In their own country of Assyria they made disciples of the sons of their people, and secretly made houses of prayer there from fear of those who worship fire and who honor fire.” The information that Christian missionaries traveled around disguised as merchants is very interesting, because it probably represents a grain of truth in the whole story. The trade in luxury goods between Rome and Persia was almost entirely in the hands of Syrian merchants, and we know that it was Syrian merchants who carried Christianity to Ethiopia, India, and Central Asia.¹¹² We would like to know more about how Christianity actually spread in the area, but “Labubna” has his own interests in mind. He prefers talking about kings and nobles. Narses, king of the Assyrians, after he heard about the apostle Addai, sent a letter to king Abgar demanding that Abgar send him either the apostle or a detailed documentation of all things that Addai said

¹¹² Missionaries and merchants were natural partners in antiquity, because they traveled together. In Syriac Christianity a missionary was often compared with a merchant seeking a pearl, which is Christ. See Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 175. The Syrian author of the late Roman manual on geography, *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, mentions that the inhabitants of Edessa and Nisibis, “buying from the Persians, they sell to the Romans and then sell back to the Persian what they purchase from the Romans.” Cf. Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1985), 70.

and did in Edessa. King Abgar sends the letter to Narses recounting the whole story.¹¹³

This short episode with Assyrian merchants illustrates very well the literary strategy used by “Labubna”. The story takes place at two levels, on the level of facts and on the level of “creative history.” On the first level one can say with certainty that there were crypto-Christians in Assyria and that they probably traveled to Edessa as merchants. Edessa was the most important Christian center east of the Euphrates, and it would naturally attract Christians living further east. It was their only link to the Christian Empire, which was often their only protector. For example, we know that when Nisibis and other regions in Assyria were transferred to the Persians in 363, Ephraim the Syrian (306-373) settled in Edessa unwilling to lead the life of a crypto-Christian.¹¹⁴ “Labubna”, however, is not satisfied with this ordinary story about the life in a border region. For some reason there must be an exchange of royal letters to give a seal of approval to everyday events. It is almost redundant to say that Eusebius never mentions anything remotely like this story. The subsequent story, however, has its counterpart in the *Ecclesiastical History*.

¹¹³ Narses of Assyria is not a historical person like Abgar. Assyria, or as Romans called it Adiabene, had an independent ruling house in the first century which converted to Judaism (Josephus *AJ* 20.17-37). No person called Narses is mentioned. The Sassanid Empire was ruled by a man called Narses (or Narseh) between 293 and 302. In 296 he concluded peace with Romans after almost a century of war violently pursued by his father Shapur I (240-272). This peace lasted for over forty years, as it was intended by the treaty.

¹¹⁴ The Romans took Nisibis under Diocletian in 298, before Ephraim was born. Persians attempted to take it back in 337-38, 346, and 350 and were unsuccessful, until Shapur II (309-379) defeated and killed the Emperor Julian in 363. Shapur II issued a decree in 337 that Christians should pay double the normal head tax. It marked the beginning of a systematic persecution of Christians in Persia, which lasted for nearly a half a century. See Jacob Neusner, “Constantine, Shapur II, and the Jewish-Christian Confrontation in Fourth Century Iran” in *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, vol. 1, edited by Jacob Neusner, Peder Borgen, Ernest Frerichs, and Richard Horsley (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 130-152.

Paragraphs 74-76 contain another piece of king Abgar's international correspondence. After writing to king Narses of Assyria, Abgar is about to communicate with the Emperor Tiberius himself. He sends a letter to Tiberius informing him that "the Jews who live in Palestine under your authority have gathered together and crucified the Messiah." Abgar is outraged. He would like to take his army to Palestine "to kill the Jews," but he could not do it out of respect for the Roman emperor. Tiberius, in turn, answers with a letter saying that he has already been informed about "what the Jews did with respect to the cross." Pilate, the procurator, had already written to the emperor. Tiberius promises Abgar that he would not hesitate "to make a legal charge against the Jews who have acted unlawfully." The emperor has already replaced Pilate and dismissed him in disgrace because "he did the will of the Jews." Finally, Tiberius affirms that it is right that the Messiah should be worshiped, particularly for the Jews, "since they saw with their own eyes everything which he did."¹¹⁵

"Labubna" places the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence in the context of the correspondence between Pilate and Tiberius, with the emperor responding to Abgar that Pilate has already informed him about the matter. This indicates that "Labubna" had probably read some of the numerous apocryphal texts about Pilate. On the other hand Eusebius, while he knows nothing about the correspondence between Abgar and Tiberius, mentions the correspondence between Pilate and Tiberius and gives it a prominent place in his *Ecclesiastical*

¹¹⁵ The passage represents an attempt to shift the responsibility for the death of Jesus from the Roman authorities to the "Jews." This kind of anti-Judaism was not limited to Edessa. For a review of similar strategies see Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Let Us Go and Burn Her Body: The Image of the Jews in the Early Dormition Traditions," *Church History* 68:4 (December 1999).

History, setting it in the context of the missions of various apostles after the Ascension of Jesus.¹¹⁶ Eusebius also quotes from Tertullian, a man “who had an accurate knowledge of the Roman law,” to confirm the existence of the report and to substantiate the claim that Tiberius was well inclined toward Christians.¹¹⁷ Pilate’s apocryphal report to Tiberius is preserved not only by Tertullian and Eusebius but also by several other sources.¹¹⁸ For example, the *Acts of Peter and Paul* included the letters in the narrative.¹¹⁹ “Labubna” obviously knows both about Pilate’s report and about alleged “sympathies for Christians harbored by Tiberius” and tries to insert the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence into that context.

In short, we see that the process of reception was not just linear, with one author adding to the previous version, but dynamic, confirming and altering elements from different sources. It is not out of the realm of possibility that the story about Pilate’s report to Tiberius might have reached Edessa by means of the Syriac translation of *Ecclesiastical History*.¹²⁰ On the other hand, early Christian literature about Pilate is enormous, and the correspondence could have entered the *TA* from a variety of sources. In any case, the underlying assumption is that any Roman emperor, including Tiberius, would strictly adhere to the

¹¹⁶ *HE* 2.2.1-6.

¹¹⁷ Tertullian *Apologeticum*, 5.21.

¹¹⁸ Various reports of Pilate to Tiberius are collected in Constantin Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Lipsiae: Avenarius et Mendelssohn, 1853).

¹¹⁹ The *Acts of Peter and Paul* preserve the correspondence between Pilate and Claudius. A similar narrative strategy is used to intercalate the story in the wider narrative. Nero questions Simon Peter and he responds, “Take the letters sent by Pontius Pilate to Claudius and you will know everything.” R. A. Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1959), par. 40-42, pp. 196-97.

¹²⁰ *HE* was translated into Syriac and Armenian at about the same time Rufinus produced a Latin translation, that is around AD 400. See the introduction to Kirsopp Lake trans., *Eusebius The Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1926), xxvii-xxxii.

highest principles of the Roman law and would not affirm the conviction of an innocent man to death by crucifixion. The necessary consequence of this assumption is that blame for crucifixion must be shifted from the Roman authorities to the Jews and indirectly to Pilate, because he did the will of the Jews. “Labubna” is willing to accept this kind of anti-Judaism in order to prove his loyalty to the Roman Empire. The correspondence, therefore, gives us a clear picture of the priorities of Christians in Edessa. “Labubna’s” attack on Judaism was made easier by the fact that the most influential Jews were living on the Persian side of the border. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, Judaism gradually transferred its intellectual and political center from Roman Palestine to Sassanid Babylonia.¹²¹ As far as the date of the addition to the *TA* is concerned, we can only say that it presupposes the tetrarchy and the consequent division of the Roman Empire. “Labubna” retrojects the tetrarchy, the system of government he is familiar with, into the past, and believes that Claudius is “the second in command” after Tiberius, that is, Tiberius is Augustus, Claudius is his Caesar. This further confirms our hypothesis that the Abgar legend is best understood in the political context of the fourth century.

Paragraphs 77-92 describe the sickness of the apostle Addai and his final sermon to the disciples. The disciples are divided into two circles, with an inner circle of ordained disciples including Aggai, Addai’s successor, Palut, second in line of succession, and Abshelomo, the scribe. On Addai’s deathbed Aggai is appointed bishop, Palut presbyter, and Abshelomo deacon. Second, there is a

¹²¹ See Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1991).

group of aristocratic patrons of Addai who are also listed as disciples. It is difficult to make a correlation between these names and historically known aristocratic families of Edessa, but the correlation must have been very clear to the original readers.¹²² Their purpose is not to engage in direct missionary activities but to serve as patrons for the inner circle of the disciples.

When compared with the public sermon of Addai, this sermon addressing the inner circle of disciples shows a different character and tone. Detailed theological points are made; something is said about Christian heresies; the canonical books of the Scriptures are listed; those who reject the Prophets, i.e., Marcionites, are chastised; the Jewish rejection of the Messiah is explained. Local nobles also listen to this private sermon and Addai gives us a compelling explanation why: “honorable nobles have heard that which I have spoken to you today and they are sufficient to be witnesses after my death that the teaching of the Lord has been carefully proclaimed.” In other words, they are the “guarantors” of authenticity of the message of the church. Here we have another indication of close cooperation, actual or wished-for, between the disciples of Addai and the local aristocracy of Edessa.

What is the purpose of the sermon? As with the public sermon, Addai’s admonitions to the inner circle are directed against two groups, first against the “crucifying Jews” and second against the “erring pagans.” The apostle adds, “with these two parties alone you have a warfare.” What is surprising is that the apostle mentions a third group never referred to before. Unlike the public

¹²² Their names are Bar Calbo, Bar Zati, Marihab, son of Bar Shemesh, Senaq bar Avida, Piroz bar Patric.

sermon, this private sermon contains material more appropriate for the inner circle, that is, more controversial issues like disagreements within the Christian community. This group is characterized as those who “investigate the secrets and as concerning hidden things written in the sacred books” and those “who judge the words of the Prophets.” Addai probably has in mind two groups, Gnostics and Marcionites.¹²³

With regard to the Jews Addai says, “Their words bear witness to our teaching concerning the judgment, suffering, resurrection, and ascension of the Messiah. They do not know that when they rise up against us, they rise up against the words of the Prophets.” Regarding the pagans, Addai warns Christians to “beware of those who worship the sun and moon (שמשא and סהרא), Bel and Nebo, and the rest of those which they call gods.” Sun and moon are not just heavenly luminaries, but, most probably, popular pre-Islamic Arabic gods. Nebo and Bel are traditional Mesopotamian divinities.¹²⁴ In sum, Addai gives us a picture of a Christian community surrounded by Jews, pagans, Gnostics and Marcionites, in spite of the alleged support of the ruler, his entire family, and the bulk of local aristocracy. These two points are hard to reconcile, unless one is to assume that the whole purpose of the *TA* is not to present the history of Christian

¹²³ St. Ephraim (306-373) vividly describes the presence of the followers of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan in Edessa. See St. Ephraim's *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, ed. by C. W. Mitchell, (London, 1912).

¹²⁴ The population of Edessa was of mixed descent speaking either Greek or Aramaic. A significant number was of Arabic descent. The members of the ruling dynasty were of either Arabic or Nabatean descent. Roman and Greek historians, like Plutarch, Tacitus, Dio Cassius, or Pliny, consistently call the inhabitants of Edessa Arabs. See Segal, *Edessa*, 9-19.

community in Edessa but to bolster its reputation and shape the future by first writing “creative history” and then appealing to the glory of old days.¹²⁵

Paragraphs 93-97 describe the death and the public funeral of Addai. The apostle is passing away, surrounded by the disciples and the nobles. At the last moment King Abgar sends an exquisite new vestment to the apostle. The king expects that in this vestment the apostle will be buried, but Addai, maintaining his allegiance to vows of poverty, returns the vestment to the king. While the city grieves, the apostle dies in peace. “Labubna” describes how the citizens of Edessa are mourning the apostle. It was not only “Christians alone who grieved over him but Jews and pagans who were in the city as well.” As we have seen above, these statements indicate that Christians were far from being an overwhelming majority in the city. The impression is that Christians, Jews, and pagans are of equal importance and no group has the majority status, either in sheer numbers or in the distribution of power. “Labubna,” however, wants to assure his readers that Addai had enjoyed a special status with the king and that this local Christian community is the heir of that status. He describes what we would call today a state funeral. Addai is buried like one of the princes. He is placed in the sepulcher where the members of the royal house were buried, the

¹²⁵ One has to remember that an appeal to the past and tradition of the fathers was one of the most powerful arguments in the ancient world.

sepulcher of the house of Aryu, the ancestors of the king Abgar's father.¹²⁶

Annual memorial services are regularly performed on the spot where the apostle was buried. Not only was the grave identified and authenticated by the text, but the order of the memorial service was presented. "Labubna" writes that on the grave site "they also performed a yearly memorial to his memory according to the ordinance and instruction which had been received by them from Addai the apostle and according to the word of Aggai who was the leader, ruler and appointed successor to the see." In short, the cult of a saint is established.

When was the cult of the apostle Addai established in Edessa? Eusebius does not mention it; neither does Egeria, who traveled to the city specifically searching for Christian antiquities. During her visit in 384 she was shown the tomb of king Abgar, and the shrine of Thomas the apostle, but not the tomb of the apostle Addai. Ephraim Syrus, who arrived in Edessa as a refugee in 363 and died there in 379, knows that Addai was the founder of the Church in Edessa, that he had healed the king, but says nothing about his tomb.¹²⁷ On the other hand, he knows about the bones of the apostle Thomas and claims that a

¹²⁶ Aryu was the reputed founder of the dynasty of Edessa, who emerged after the decline of the Seleucid power around 132-131 B.C. His name is the Syro-Aramaic term for lion. Among pre-Islamic Arabs, the names of animals are often used as appellation of tribal groups, or of individual members of tribes. Greek and Roman historians always call the rulers of Edessa φύλαρχοι, or chiefs. However, Edessa was also a Hellenistic city, which implied the division into city-tribes, or districts. Each city-tribe had a heroic founder called επώνυμος. In the *TA* the city aristocracy is organized along Hellenistic lines, they are the first and most honored (πρώτοι καί προτιμώμενοι). The apostle Addai seems to be awarded honors due to a member of the aristocratic circle. See Segal, *Edessa*, 16ff.

¹²⁷ Ephraim *Carmina Nisibena* 27.62.

merchant brought his bones from India to Edessa.¹²⁸ Rufinus also confirms this by calling Edessa “a city of believers in Mesopotamia, adorned with the relics of the apostle Thomas.”¹²⁹ In other words, we can say that the bones of the apostle Thomas were transferred to Edessa sometime before 379. The cult of the apostle Addai must have been established after that date.

Should we conclude that the cult of the apostle Addai developed in competition with the cult of the apostle Thomas? Once again, a comparison with Eusebius is very helpful. He makes it clear that Thomas, as one of the twelve, was chosen to evangelize Parthia, while other apostles received surrounding provinces of the Roman Empire.¹³⁰ This kind of allotment of the world and assignment of the portions to various apostles, although often based on earlier traditions, cannot be taken at face value. It reflects the administrative division of the Late Roman Empire, in particular the one introduced by Diocletian and Constantine’s successors. Thaddeus, as one of the seventy, is assigned a missionary area much smaller than the one appropriate for one of the twelve. In other words, Thomas symbolizes the metropolitan bishop, who exercises his

¹²⁸ Ephraim describes the wailing of the devil caused by the power of the bone of Apostle Thomas. “I stirred up Death that I might slay the Apostles, so that, by their death, I might escape their torment. Now I am tormented yet more cruelly. The Apostle whom I slew in India has come before me to Edessa...That merchant bore his bones – or rather they bore him...The coffin of Thomas has slain me; the hidden strength in it tortures me...His treasure was opened in Edessa and by its help the great city has been enriched. Ephraim,” *Carmina Nisibena*, 42. See also Segal, *ibid.* 175. At some later date in the reception history of the Thomas legend, the merchant receives the name Khabin.

¹²⁹ Philip R. Amidon trans., *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia, Books 10 and 11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹³⁰ Eusebius, *HE* 3.1. “Thomas was chosen for Parthia, Andrew for Scythia, John for Asia, Peter seems to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, and Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia.”

power over a province, while Thaddeus represents a diocesan bishop.¹³¹

Furthermore, Eusebius is silent about the grave of the apostle Thomas and we must conclude that the cult of the apostle Thomas did not exist in Edessa at the time when Eusebius was writing, early in the fourth century. We know that Eusebius has resolved the “competition” between the apostle Addai and the apostle Thomas by making Addai the disciple of Thomas. These two traditions grew independently and were reconciled when the circumstances required it. We could only assume that the Thomas tradition emphasized the link with the East, that is, Persia, while the Addai tradition emphasized the links with the West, that is, the Roman Empire.

Paragraphs 98-102 speak about the successors of Addai. At first the Christian community in Edessa lived in peace. The manner of life of Addai’s disciples was so impeccable that the population admired them immensely. “Labubna” says that the disciples were so well respected that “even the priest of the temple of Nebo and Bel continuously divided honor with them.” It is surprising that pagan priests and Christian ministers would live in peaceful coexistence and share mutual respect. Similar respect shown by the pagan high priest toward the Christian bishop is described in the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya*, the work coming from the same literary cycle that produced the *Teaching of Addai*. The main point of the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya* is that a pagan high priest (*Sharbel*) and a

¹³¹ The term metropolitan first appears in the fourth canon of the Council of Nicea (325). One of the duties of the metropolitan bishop was to summon the regional synod of bishops. Due to Diocletian’s grouping of provinces into greater entities, the post superior to metropolitan bishop appeared. He was called the patriarch or exarch. This situation is reflected in the *TA*. When Palut, the second successor of Addai, is about to be ordained bishop he goes to the patriarch residing in Antioch.

Christian bishop (*Barsamya*) became such a good friend that one is willing to follow the other into martyrdom. “Labubna” is preparing his readership for the sequel of the story, a role filled by the *Acts of Sharbel and Barsamya*. Second, in paragraphs 62-67 we read that Addai had converted the high priests of the city. “The chief priests of this town... run and threw down the altars on which they sacrificed before Nebo and Bel their gods, except the great altar in the midst of the town.... And Addai ... baptized them... and those who used to worship stones and stocks sat at his feet.” It is obvious that this section is a later addition to the legend. The circumstances it describes would be unthinkable for Eusebius, who had to live through the Great Persecution.

What is one to make of the alleged friendship between pagan high priest and Christian bishop? The Christian community in Edessa knew very well that they were perpetuating the legend about king Abgar’s conversion of Christianity. They also knew well that none of the kings of Edessa ever renounced the traditional religion (paganism) and that Addai’s conversions were not as successful as they were presented in the text. A reason had to be invented to explain why, after everyone in the city was converted by the apostle Addai, including the king and the nobles, the city’s non-Christian population is alive, well, and prosperous. This part of the story provides an explanation for the contrast between the fantasy described in the legend and the reality lived on the streets of Edessa. “Labubna” had to apply this literary device, because he had painted the image of the Christian community in such high colors that nothing in its subsequent history could come remotely close to the original ideal achieved under Abgar and Addai.

The author decided to “blame it” on Abgar’s children and their backsliding. Once “Labubna” opted for this plot, things had to turn sour for the Christian community, and they did.

One of Abgar’s rebellious sons sends an order to Aggai to make him a tiara of gold as he had made one for his father. (Aggai, a typical Syrian merchant-artisan, had made silk garments and tiaras before he became a bishop.)¹³² When Aggai refused the order, the son of Abgar broke the bishop’s legs in the church, and Aggai died instantly. The incident was so violent that the bishop was not even able to ordain his successor, Palut. According to his wishes, Aggai was buried in the church. Although “Labubna” says that there was “bitter sorrow in all the church and in all the city, like the sorrow which was when the apostle Addai died” one has to note that Aggai was not buried in the royal sepulcher. The contrast between the pious father and impious son is not just a literary device underscoring the difference between the good and the bad ruler. By making this sudden turn in the plot “Labubna” takes his readers back from the realm of the legend to the realm of reality. It could be taken as a tacit acknowledgment by the author that none of the Abgarids was ever a Christian.

The last paragraph of the story describes Palut’s ordination. Palut travels to Antioch to be ordained by Serapion, bishop of Antioch. Serapion was a historical person, the bishop of Antioch from 190-211, which makes the chronology of this

¹³² The *TA* gives indication that there were merchant guilds in Edessa and that exercise of certain profession may have been restricted to the authorized persons. See Segal, *Edessa*, 139.

ordination impossible if Addai was a disciple of Jesus.¹³³ We have learned that correct dating of the events was not on "Labubna's" list of priorities. By mentioning this ordination "Labubna" is trying to convey a different point. Palut seems to be a Greek name and his seeking ordination from Antioch indicates the shift in direction in the government of the Church in Edessa, toward the Roman Empire.¹³⁴ "Labubna" gives us an indication why he considers ordination by Serapion of Antioch important: "Serapion received his ordination from Zephyrinus, bishop of the city of Rome from the succession of ordination to the priesthood of Simon Peter, who received it from our Lord, and who had been bishop there in Rome twenty five years." One of the main purposes for writing the *TA* was to establish a connection between Christians in Edessa and the Roman Empire based on creative history writing and on the blurry recollections preserved about the age-old ruling dynasty. Regarding Zephyrinus and Serapion, "Labubna's" chronology is correct. Zephyrinus succeeded the Pope Victor, who died in 198. Zephyrinus died in 217, so he was a contemporary of Serapion (190-211). Was "Labubna's" source none else but Eusebius? Eusebius mentions nothing about Zephyrinus ordaining Serapion, but he says that Victor was "the thirteenth bishop of Rome after Peter" and that Zephyrinus was his successor.¹³⁵ In any case, the readers of the *TA* considered it important that one of the most

¹³³ Eusebius mentions Serapion in *HE* 5.19 and 6.12, where he quotes several passages from his letters. He says nothing about Palut. Ironically, in one of the cited passages, Serapion warns Christian community in Rhossus not to read apocryphal writings.

¹³⁴ Segal, *Edessa*, 81.

¹³⁵ *HE* 5.28 and 6.14 and 6.20.

influential bishops of Edessa, Palut, had strong ties with the Church in the Roman Empire.¹³⁶

At the end of our paragraph-by-paragraph survey, one can say that the Abgar legend has undergone a considerable development between the early days of the fourth century, when it was first recorded by Eusebius, and the end of the fourth century when the *TA* was written. From a simple report about the conversion of the king and a short correspondence between Abgar and Jesus, the legend became a developed historical prose narrative reminiscent of apocryphal apostolic acts. There are things that Eusebius and the *Teaching of Addai* share, and there are things that are added to the legend by the author of the *Teaching of Addai*. In all of “Labubna’s” augmentations to the Abgar legend one tendency prevails, the emphasis on Edessa as a city closely linked with the Roman Empire. These details, not present in Eusebius, have a clear political agenda. We can be certain that these additions were made during the course of the fourth century, almost all point in one direction, toward the Christian Roman Empire. They are the following:

1. (16-32) The story of Protonice, wife of Claudius, who went to Palestine where she discovered the “True Cross.” The story is a variant of the Helena legend and her finding of the “True Cross.”
2. (33-35) The narrative of the conversion of the noble families of Edessa, with many names that must have been important on the local level.

¹³⁶ Ephraim Syrus, writing in the second half of the fourth century, says that still in his days the Catholic (Orthodox) Christians of Edessa were called ‘Palutians.’ Segal says that the name Palutians stood in opposition to Arian groups, while Bauer believes this was in opposition to various early heretical groups, like Marcionites. Segal, *Edessa*, 81. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 20-22.

3. (36-61) Addai's first sermon directed to all citizens of Edessa. Eusebius knows that there was a sermon, but does not report it in full. The sermon indicates that both paganism and Judaism were strong in the city.
 4. (62-67) Conversion of the two high priests and the breaking of all pagan altars in the city, while "the great high place" in the middle of the city was left intact, indicating the strength of traditional cults.
 5. (68-71) Building of the church in Edessa by the order of king Abgar. Nothing else is known about this church.
 6. (72-73) Correspondence between King Abgar and King Narses of the Assyrians. Its purpose is to raise the prestige of Edessa as the metropolitan center in the region.
 7. (74-76) Correspondence between King Abgar and the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Its purpose is to illustrate the close relationship between Roman Empire and Edessa.
 8. (77-92) Addai's second sermon directed to a closed circle of the disciples and the nobles of the city. The nobles serve as patrons of the Church and the guarantors of the authenticity of its teaching.
 9. (93-97) Death and public funeral of the apostle Addai, and development of a cult of the saint around the grave.
 10. (98-103) The successors of the apostle Addai, Aggai and Palut. Ordination of Palut by the bishop of Antioch. Relapse to paganism under Abgar's successors.
- As far as the common elements in Eusebius and the *Teaching of Addai* are concerned, there are no important differences, and only two minor discrepancies,

which affect the two most valuable cult objects of Edessa, the letter and the portrait of Jesus.¹³⁷ First, in Eusebius Jesus' reply to Abgar is in the form of a written letter, while the *Teaching of Addai* presents it as an oral report. Second, Eusebius is silent about a major feature in the *Teaching of Addai* how Hanan, the messenger of the king, painted the portrait of Jesus. To explain the silence of Eusebius about the portrait and the failure of "Labubna" to mention the letter, one can only speculate that the letter and the portrait were guarded by two different churches in Edessa. Some kind of local rivalry might have existed, with one group favoring the letter, the other the portrait.¹³⁸

(B2) Egeria

In 384 Egeria, a pilgrim from the West, traveled to Edessa and the surrounding areas of Syrian Mesopotamia.¹³⁹ Her account of the Abgar legend is very different from the one presented in Eusebius and the *TA*. Egeria wrote an account of her pilgrimage, while Eusebius wrote a history of the church and "Labubna" something that could be called historical fiction. She traveled to

¹³⁷ Analyzing the problem of the Syriac source used by Eusebius Sebastian Brock concludes: "This Syriac document from which Eusebius quotes in fact survives, albeit in a later and somewhat expanded form, incorporated into a much longer work known as the *Teaching Addai*." Brock, "Eusebius", 212-234.

¹³⁸ Segal speculates that the Jacobites were the custodians of the letter and the Melkites, mostly Greek in origin, were in possession of the portrait. Nothing in our sources indicates the divisions inflicted on Near Eastern Christians by the council of Chalcedon. It could be that the difference reflects here some fourth century precursors of the fifth century divisions. See Segal, *Edessa*, 77.

¹³⁹ The date of Egeria's journey is not certain. It could not have taken place before 363, or after 527, when Justinian began rebuilding the monastery of St Catherine at Sinai. Most of the scholars date her journey to Edessa in 380s. We accept this date here. See Manuel C. Diaz y Diaz, *Itinerarium Egeriae* (Sources Chrétienne, no. 296; Paris: edition du Cerf, 1982).

Edessa and the province of Osrhoene with the specific purpose of visiting the shrine of the apostle Thomas. Egeria's account is a report by a visitor to the region, one not well acquainted with the fine points of local traditions. As a secondhand account it could not be used as a decisive source for local traditions. A local bishop serves as her guide through the city, and he speaks about the beliefs and tales associated with various Christian shrines in the city.¹⁴⁰ In fact, her account confirms that the Abgar legend was transmitted orally.

The first thing Egeria does when she arrives in Edessa is to visit and pray at the shrine of the apostle Thomas. The most striking feature of the account is the omission of the apostle Thaddeus/Addai. She identifies Thomas as the apostle of Edessa and says nothing about Thaddeus/Addai.¹⁴¹ How do we explain this major difference, indicating the existence of a different trajectory in the reception of the Abgar legend? Thomas was universally recognized as the apostle of Parthia.¹⁴² In particular, the traditions received under the name of Thomas indicate that he was the apostle to the regions outside the Roman Empire.¹⁴³ One would have to assume that the switch from Thomas to Thaddeus, recorded by both Eusebius and the *Teaching of Addai*, indicates a shift in orientation of the Christians in Edessa. With Thaddeus coming on stage, Christianity in Edessa no

¹⁴⁰ The bishop in question seems to be Eulogius, bishop from 378 to 386. Egeria calls him 'confessor', probably because he was exiled under the Arian Valens 364-378. On the other hand, the *Chronicle of Edessa* attributes the transfer of the bones of the apostle Thomas to Cyrus, bishop from 386 to 395. This probably refers to the transfer from the church outside the city to the one inside the city walls.

¹⁴¹ One has to be cautious not to put too much weight on Egeria's identification of the apostle as Thomas. She gives a second hand account of the story she heard from the bishop.

¹⁴² Eusebius, *HE* 3.1.

¹⁴³ See the *Acts of Thomas*.

longer looks toward the East; Thaddeus brings Christianity in Edessa into the orbit of the West, in other words, into the fold of Rome, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem.¹⁴⁴

As during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Egypt, Egeria pays great attention to all the holy sites and objects in Edessa. To look for Christian antiquities is the purpose of her journey. She is given a tour of the city, and the local bishop shows her the palace of King Abgar and his marble portrait. No mention is made of the portrait of Jesus, first to appear later in the *Teaching of Addai*. After she is shown the portrait of Abgar, Egeria is told the story of the letter of Jesus. The bishop, her host and guide, emphasizes the great protective power of the letter by telling how the Persian siege of the city was lifted: when Abgar was surrounded and without hope for survival, “he held up the letter, open in his hands, and immediately a darkness fell over the Persians.” The darkness was not the only miracle performed by the power of the letter. The pool in the city, another holy place, testifies to the miraculous delivery from the Persians. The river Daisan was flowing through the middle of the city, but the Persian dug a canal to divert the river and force the city to surrender. At the same time a spring appeared in the middle of the city, and to this day Edessa has a source of water supply within the city.¹⁴⁵ Egeria makes the next stop in her tour of the city at the

¹⁴⁴ Exactly the opposite happened to Rabbinic Judaism. It was pushed from the West (Palestine) to the East (Mesopotamia). While there were Jews living in Babylonia ever since the Exile, Babylon (and Mesopotamia in general) became the most important center of Rabbinic Judaism only after the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Both processes, Judaism retreating from the West and Christianity abandoning the East, took place between the 4th and the 7th century. See Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* vols. 1-4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969).

¹⁴⁵ The pool exists to this day in the courtyard of the Abd al-Rahman mosque and is called the pool of Abraham. Islamic tradition identifies Edessa as the place where Abraham had the dispute with Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-9, Qur'an, sura 2, verse 258ff.). See Segal, *Edessa*, 2.

gate where the messenger of the king, Ananias, entered with the letter; the bishop reads the actual letter to the pilgrim at the gate. He also notes that since Ananias passed under the gate with the letter of Jesus, no unclean person, person in mourning, or a dead body has ever been allowed to pass under the gate. Finally, the bishop gives to Egeria copies of both the Lord's letter to Abgar and the Abgar's letter to Jesus, which she takes home as precious relics.¹⁴⁶

The most important item became the letter of Jesus, because pilgrims and travelers were hardly interested in other details of the Abgar legend. It is hard to believe that Egeria would remember who were the disciples of Addai or which noble family received and supported the apostle.¹⁴⁷ The only name Egeria remembers is the messenger Hanan, because he is the one who brought the letter and she herself sees the gate under which he passed carrying the "words of the Lord." As we have seen in the case of the portrait of Jesus, items that were relatively insignificant for the locals became of the utmost important for the pilgrims, who then spread the story.¹⁴⁸

In sum, Egeria's account provides us a very useful model of how the legend spread across the boundaries of the region. She indicates the existence of a living oral tradition about the legend, narrated to her during the tour. The only time she is shown the written text is when the bishop reads the letter of Jesus.

¹⁴⁶ Copies of the letter inscribed in Greek have been found on two stones at Euchaita in northern Anatolia, on a stone at Philippi in Macedonia, and finally on a stone at Kirk Magara near Edessa itself. Segal *Edessa*, 75. A papyrus fragment of the letter found in Egypt might have been used as an amulet. Rolf Peppermüller, "Griechische Papyrusfragmente der Doctrina Addai" in *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971) 289-301.

¹⁴⁷ We have noted above that Eusebius also omits many details that might have been important locally.

¹⁴⁸ The portrait of Jesus is barely mentioned in the *Teaching of Addai*, but the later Byzantine work called the *Acts of Thaddeus* puts the portrait to the center stage.

She also confirms how volatile the legend was at the close of the fourth century. Her silence on the apostle Addai illustrates well the fluid nature of the story, for if we read only the *Teaching of Addai* we would assume that maintaining the memory of the apostle Addai was the living bread of the people in Edessa. Finally, her interest is in the past of the Church, its Christian antiquities. Because of that interest she sought out Edessa and recorded the story. We know that interest in Christian antiquities surged in the fourth century. The writing of the first church history by Eusebius represents the beginning of that movement. It seems that our story was recorded only when the urge to write about the past became irresistible for the church; and yet this happened in large part to legitimize places, episcopal successions, and doctrinal tendencies in the fourth century.

Summary of the Findings

The figure on the page 86 is the outcome of the analysis; it illustrates the process of reception taking place in two phases, the oral and the written. It begins with the oral traditions related to the apostles Thomas and Addai, memories about the royal house of Edessa. We know very little about these traditions, but we know of their existence. The oral tradition continued to develop, even after the written version appeared during the tumultuous days of the Great Persecution, 303-313. In addition to the oral traditions, the figure also illustrates the relationship between the written versions of the legend, thus covering the second phase in the process of reception. The results of our literary analysis are

presented in a shortened form. The following versions are included: Eusebius, his Syriac source (which we call Early Syriac Version), Egeria's account, and the *Teaching of Addai*. Two periods of receptions can be delineated after looking at the written versions of the text. The *terminus ante quem* is the suppression of the Diatessaron by bishop Rabbula (412 – 435) because the legend mentions Diatessaron as scripture. The latest phases in the reception took place after the war between the Romans and the Persians in 363. Following great Roman losses Edessa was filled with refugees, including St. Ephraim, who moved to the city from Nisibis. We know that both Egeria and the *Teaching of Addai* record the story from this period. The preceding period in the process of reception took place between the Great Persecution 303-313 and the war in 363.¹⁴⁹ We will deal with the later period in detail in the following chapter.

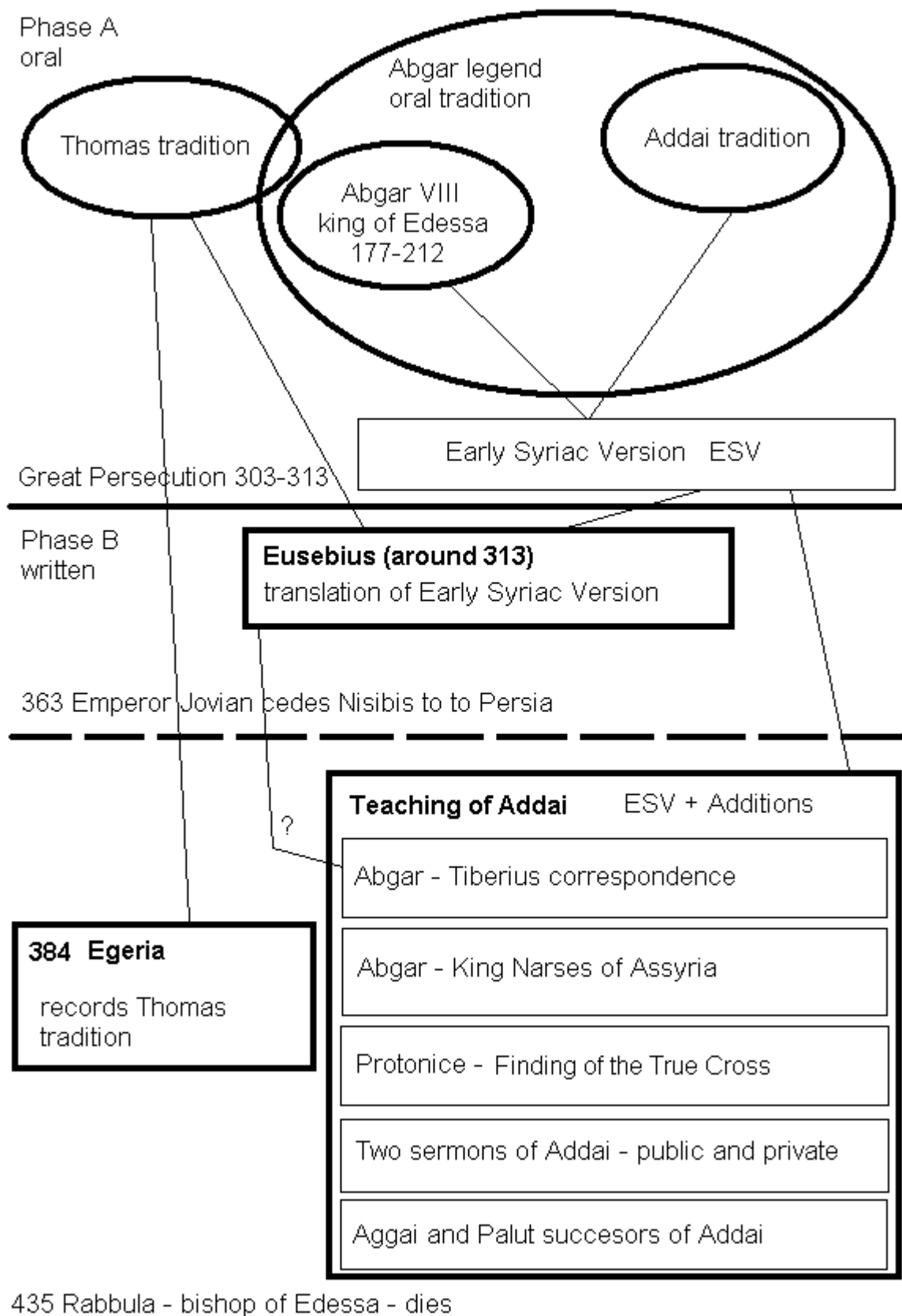
We believe that the approach adopted here, the one that emphasizes the reception of the legend, has been justified. Especially in the fourth century, the legend was extremely fluid. Its character oscillated between the “trustworthy” account quoted by Eusebius which even includes “archival” documentation, the exaggerated pseudo-historical prose written by “Labubna”, and the down-to-earth account given orally to Egeria by the local bishop. Many details of the process are unknown and will probably remain beyond our power of reconstruction. The inability to reconstruct all the pieces in the process is frustrating, but reconstruction is not the point of the method adopted. By focusing on the function of this or that particular piece of the legend, we have been able to make some

¹⁴⁹ The war against Persia undertaken by Diocletian in 298 stabilized the frontier after the great instability in the third century. The situation lasted until the Roman losses in 363.

suggestions about its possible use in the community and also point to the time when the particular passage entered into the legend.

We have made an effort to understand the rationale behind what is essentially a very simple story: Jesus sends one of his apostles to a city in Upper Mesopotamia. One could say that the existence of this correspondence is the kernel and everything else is husk. We have tried another approach. We were not searching for the historical core and did not start with the assumption that the Abgar legend is one of the “sources” for Christianity in Edessa in the first or second century. That approach would result in rejection of the legend as historically unreliable; the fictional part would be treated as husk. We asked the question: What was the status and function of the legend in the fourth century? By focusing on the husk and not on the core of the legend, we have multiplied our gain.

Figure 1 – Reception of the Abgar legend Phases A and B



The Abgar legend should not be viewed in isolation because it represents only part of a wider movement. Throughout the fourth century there was revived interest in Christian antiquities, or relics from the Christian past.¹⁵⁰ Palestine became known as the Holy Land. Pilgrims began to travel there and to other places associated with either biblical figures or martyrs. The Abgar legend was a product of this quest for Christian antiquities. It is a written equivalent of a relic. It shares many similarities with the legend of the “True Cross” and its reception, which took place about the same time. Its function was no different from the purpose of the wood of the “True Cross” as it was distributed around the Mediterranean.¹⁵¹ It was a symbol whose purpose was to open the eyes of faith. Christian writers are often aware of the dubious authenticity of the relics, but the authenticity of a relic is not the main point of its existence. It is the effect that it can create. Gregory of Nyssa speaks about the power of relics, saying: “those who behold them embrace them as though the actual body; then they pour forth tears for his piety and suffering, and bring forward their supplications to the martyr as though he were present and complete.”¹⁵² We believe that the Abgar legend had exactly the same effect on the people of Edessa. The relic is not just a document from the past, but a stimulus to open the wider lens of interior sight.

¹⁵⁰ There is a considerable literature on pilgrimages to the Holy Land and the quest for relics in late antiquity. E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312-460* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). Robert Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁵¹ According to the legend, the wood of the ‘True Cross’ was found during the reign of Constantine. Only fifty years later we find pieces of the ‘True Cross’ spread all across the Mediterranean. E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312-460* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 128-133.

¹⁵² PG 46, 740a-b.

The function of a relic, be it a piece of wood from the Cross or a letter written by Jesus, is not only to open the eyes of faith, however. It also performs a valuable social and political function. Eusebius and the *Teaching of Addai* have different rationales for telling a story about a king and an apostle. Eusebius opens the account on the Abgar Legend with the phrase “ἡ περί τον Θαδδαίου ιστορία.” He also writes that the main purpose of his writing of the *Ecclesiastical History* is to “save from oblivion the successors, not perhaps of all our Savior’s apostles, but at least of the most distinguished, in the most famous and still pre-eminent churches.”¹⁵³ In other words, Eusebius makes it clear that the legend is the story of the apostles. He gives a summary of the acts of the apostle Thaddeus to provide evidence for the extraordinary events in history of salvation that occurred in the time between Jesus and Constantine. Eusebius knows nothing about the apostolic succession established by the *Teaching of Addai*, where Addai is succeeded by Aggai, and Aggai by Palut.

The *Teaching of Addai* tells the same story, but places it in the local context of Edessa. The apostle Addai is even more prominent in the Syriac text than in Eusebius, because the scope of the narrative is local. Egeria, on the other hand, can afford not to mention Addai as the apostle of Edessa. It makes very little difference to a pilgrim from a distant land whether the apostle’s name was Thomas or Thaddeus. Any apostle would provide the same religious experience.

Embracing fully the local concerns, the *Teaching of Addai* serves as legitimizing document for the local Christian community in Edessa. Beyond

¹⁵³ HE 1.1.4.

ecclesiastical issues, it is also concerned with local political problems. One of its main goals is to link the church in Edessa with the Roman Empire and establish it as an apostolic foundation. By the events described in the *Teaching of Addai*, Christianity in Edessa is linked not only to Jesus and his apostle Addai but also to the Roman Empire. In a word, Christians in Edessa are Romans.¹⁵⁴ The Abgar legend proves their Ρωμιοσύνη (“Romanness”).

One has to ask then a further question: The Abgar legend implies that Christians in Edessa were Romans as opposed to what? What were the other options? Was it being Edessans, Syrians, Armenians, Arabs, or Persians? For example, we have noted an increase in anti-Judaism among the Christians in Edessa, which is strange for a community with strong historical links to Judaism.¹⁵⁵ Maybe for both sides, Jews and Christians, the fourth century was a time for choosing not only one’s religious preference but also one’s side of the political border. The Talmud, after all, was written in Babylon, not in Constantinople. The legend performed a political function as well during its reception. We will deal with this issue in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁴ Syriac writers, without exceptions, call the people we know as Byzantine Greeks “Romans” (in Syriac (ܪܘܡܝܐ or ܪܘܡܝܐ), because Constantinople was the new Rome.

¹⁵⁵ Many scholars have suggested that the Abgar legend is a direct borrowing from the Jewish story about the conversion of the royal family of Adiabene (Assyria) to Judaism. Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 8-9. The Jewish story is preserved in Josephus, *AJ*, 20.2.1-4. This theory will be discussed in chapter 4.

CHAPTER III

THE POLITICAL RHETORIC OF “LABUBNA”¹

Truth and Dissimulation

One of the unpronounced aims of the Abgar legend is to depict the city of Edessa as a part of the Roman Empire and its citizens as Romans. In other words, the message of the text is not only religious but also political. It represents the interests of one social group and is devoted to a patriotic goal, namely to incorporate as much as possible of the Christian community in Edessa under the Roman umbrella. As an idealized and largely utopian picture of life in a frontier city, it provides a poor and often inconsistent representation of reality while glossing over alternative representations.² Because of the political nature of the story, it should not come as a surprise that the story presents itself as the truth about Christianity in Edessa, an accurate and authenticated account of what really happened.

Politics is always theatrical, but it was especially flamboyant in late antiquity, and even more so when holy men were involved. Our text, in which a mendicant

¹ We call “Labubna” the anonymous author from the late fourth and early fifth century who actually compiled the text we now call “The Teaching of Addai.”

² A letter written by Julian during his passage through the area in 363 indicates the existence of the three ecclesiastical factions, Arians, Orthodox, and Valentinians (probably followers of Bardaisan, who was considered a disciple of Valentinus). See Julian, *Ep.* 43 (40). English translation in J. Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies* (London, SPCK 1989), 65. Walter Bauer describes a variety of Christian groups present in Edessa. W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 1-43.

itinerant missionary cures, counsels, and finally converts a powerful local ruler, is an excellent example of the theatrical involvement of late ancient holy men in politics.³ Even when one takes into account the colorful excesses we have come to expect from Syrian holy men, there is still something incredulous in the whole story. Comparing the legend with a theatrical production, one might say that the backdrop and the costumes are, allegedly, set in the first century, but the dialogues and the action betray some other historical period.⁴ In particular, when we look at the political rhetoric of the story one remembers the biblical metaphor: "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."⁵ To avoid complete dismissal of the legend on account of its frequent historical anachronisms, we have analyzed the legend as a work of historical fiction, written and intended for a particular audience, namely the Christian community of Edessa.⁶

Reading the text as political fiction does not preclude us from asking historical questions such as: What was the purpose of the representation given in the story? What message did it bring to the contemporary audience? and most importantly, Who benefited from it? Using once again the analogy with the

³ For the approach adopted here Peter Brown's programmatic essays are essential for the understanding of the delicate balance between politics and religion in late antiquity. See Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

⁴ Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, is not a source for history of the Danish invasion of England in the early Middle Ages. On the other hand, this does not preclude us from using Hamlet to gather information about the tastes and practices of the audience in Elizabethan England.

⁵ Gen 27:22.

⁶ Historical novel is a literary genre that studies the relationship between personal fortunes and political conflicts and even though the costumes, the décor, and the settings reflect one particular time period, its message is directed to some other period. Christ Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), s. v. *historical novel*.

theater, the questions could be expressed as, how authentic are the backdrop and the costumes? What kind of information can the play provide about the period in which it was written? and What does it say about the taste of the audience? In this chapter we will analyze the apparent anachronisms in the legend, proceeding in two steps, looking first at the characters, next at the settings of the story. In particular our focus will be on the rhetoric of the latest phase of the process of reception, the second part of phase B presented on Figure 1 (p.86). This phase culminated in the compilation of the Syriac version of the Abgar legend, brought together by the author working in the late fourth century, who unconvincingly claims to have been the eyewitness of the story, and calls himself “Labubna.”⁷

Reception of a legend is a long process, but some boundaries need to be set. We have taken the year 363 to represent the beginning of the latest phase in the history of reception. In that year the last pagan emperor, Julian, was disgracefully defeated on the outskirts of the Persian capital. Julian’s successor, the emperor Jovian, was forced to cede large portions of Mesopotamia to Persia. As a consequence many Christians had to flee from areas that came under Persian control to Roman territory. Ephraim the Syrian was one of those emigrants, and his work in Edessa put the city on the map of important cities in the Christian world. At that point in time Edessa became the most prominent outpost of the Roman Empire in the border area. Even though Ephraim did not have any noteworthy personal involvement with the legend and seems not to have been

⁷ In Syriac literature the legend of Abgar is known by the name of its alleged author. Wherever we refer to the legend as “Labubna”, we have in mind the Syriac version.

aware of its existence, his flight from the Persian to the Roman side of the border is symbolic of a large geo-political shift in the configuration of power in the region. When the persecution of Christians ended in the Roman Empire, it had just begun in the Persian.⁸ Many decided not to remain under Persian control but to move across the border and begin a new life. The Roman government responded with persecution of other religious groups living on the both sides of the border, such as Manicheans and Jews, on account of their alleged sympathies for Persia.

Julian's demise left its mark on Syriac-speaking Christianity on both sides of the border. It triggered a process of relatively dynamic assimilation and gradual conformation to the cultural patterns of the Roman Empire. The parts of Mesopotamia that remained under Roman control increasingly became more integrated with the rest of Syria. On the other hand, Christians, as well as other religious groups like Manichaeans and Jews, who were now under the Sassanid control, began their journey toward full separation from the Roman Empire.⁹ An important milestone on that journey was the introduction of what was, in effect, a millet system in 410 by the Persians and the abolition of the Jewish Patriarchate in 429 by the Romans. The millet system brought relief to Christians living in

⁸ In Persia before the conversion of Constantine Christianity was tolerated much more than in Rome. A systematic persecution began only in the later part of the reign of Chosroes II (309 – 379) after the death of Constantine. The Church was recognized as what would later be called a millet in 410 when the archbishop of Seleucia became the 'Head of all the Christians of the East' and directly responsible to the King of Kings. See Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 110-111.

⁹ Sassanid authorities began to differentiate between native Christians called *nasraye* and those of Western (Roman) origin, called *krestyane*. See Sebastian Brook, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties" in Stuart Mews ed., *Religious and National Identity, Studies in Church History XVIII* (Oxford, 1982).

Persia, but it also equated religion with group identity (ethnicity) and produced all the negative consequences of such a policy of tolerance based on exclusion or even segregation.

Whether they worshiped one God or many gods, the Romans always understood their empire as universal, regardless of which religious group was the majority.¹⁰ The millet system was not acceptable to the Roman mind, trained to believe that there is only one law and only one truth.¹¹ Romans, heirs to this kind of Hellenic rationalism, wanted to be sure that the empire encompasses the whole universe, is ruled by one emperor and under one God, remains based on one universal law, under one political system, and is not particularized by identification with any of its ethnic/religious groups. The experiment failed. While theoretically still recognizing the rights of all citizens, in practice the government introduced discriminatory legislation, first against the pagans,¹² then the Jews,¹³ and finally against Christian heretics.¹⁴ The policy also required an effort toward

¹⁰ Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Ever since Plato, the main problem of ancient political philosophy was the relationship between λόγος and νόμος. In the Republic (713e) he writes of 'law' (νόμος) as the 'distribution' (διανομή) of immortal reason (νοῦς). In other words legislation is an attempt to apply divine reason to the details of social life. J. H. Burns, *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22.

¹² In 391 Theodosius I issued the first of series of laws that made pagan worship illegal.

¹³ In spite of recurring incidents of anti-Semitism, Jewish worship was never banned and remained legally protected, but the community was burdened with some serious civic disabilities, such as the exclusion from public service and the bar.

¹⁴ Under Justin and Justinian, heretics could not execute any legal act, including making of wills, receiving inheritances, and giving testimony in a court of law. Often this legislation was applied to Jews and Samaritans. A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 938-964.

assimilation of various groups into the cultural fusion envisioned by the guiding principle of universality.

The upper limit of the period under consideration is marked by the death of the influential pro-Cyrrilline bishop Rabbula in 435 and the beginning of the Christological controversies. Then comes the tumultuous but lengthy episcopate of his successor Ibas (435-449 and again 451-457). The process of Hellenization, a process of comprehensive inclusion of Edessa in the culture of the Roman Empire, naturally did not stop with the death of Rabbula. Quite to the contrary, his successor Ibas was a great admirer of Greek culture and was often accused of Aristotelian leanings. While Rabbula and Ibas were on opposite sides of the Christological issue, they both belonged to a cultural world very different from the one known to Aphrahat and Ephraim. Rabbula and Ibas, although adversaries in the world of faith, sought to express it in Hellenistic philosophical and scientific terms, representing two opposites still within the same culture. Philoxenus of Mabbug (440 – 523), who felt the need to correct the commonly used Peshitta translation by looking at the Greek original, gives a vivid illustration of the change that had affected Syriac-speaking culture. Explaining why Ephraim used the symbolic term *מִזְג* (mix) for the union in Christ, he says, “our Syriac tongue is not accustomed to use the precise terms that are in currency with the Greeks.”¹⁵ The statement expresses the embarrassment of a cosmopolitan bishop who tries to gloss over the “provincial inferiority” of his noteworthy but

¹⁵ Sebastian Brock, “From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning” in Nina Garsoïan, Thomas Mathews and Robert Thompson eds. *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, 1980; Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 20.

unsophisticated predecessor. It also represents a break with a tradition that was expressing profound theological notions in symbolic terms. This tradition is now replaced with the precise philosophical language of the Greeks.

Before the Abgar legend became popular, the Syriac-speaking population in Edessa simply did not harbor a strong feeling of belonging to the culture of the Roman Empire. The empire, with its synthesis of Hellenistic culture and Christian faith, did not figure as a player in their cultural world. Ephraim (306 – 373) can write, “Happy is the man who has not tasted of the venom of the Greeks;” but Greeks for him are pagans, not the imperial court in Constantinople, nor even the great city of Antioch, the cosmopolitan metropolis of Syria, the place where the followers of Jesus were given their Greek name “Christians” for the first time.¹⁶ The culture of the new capital on the Bosphorus was simply too far away from the world of the frontier, and its cultural influence was negligible. On the other side of the border, Aphrahat, who died around 345, expressed what seems to be the exact opposite of Ephraim’s statement. He assured his readers that the Roman Empire would never be conquered.¹⁷ The contrast with Ephraim is obvious, but it would be absolutely wrong to conclude that Aphrahat was thoroughly Hellenized. Everything else he writes give us a clear indication how distant was his world from the culture of the empire. His kind of Christianity, which still displayed

¹⁶ Acts 11:26

¹⁷ Warning the Persian ruler against the war with Romans Aphrahat exclaimed: “The Roman Empire shall not be conquered. Have no doubt of this, for the Hero whose name is Jesus is coming with His power, and His armor upholds the whole army of the Empire.” Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 14.

remarkable kinship with Judaism, would not have been understood by most of the subjects of the Christian Emperor in the West.¹⁸

We believe that in this political context, namely the Romanization of Syriac-speaking Christians, we shall find the proper role for the Abgar legend in the latter half of the fourth century. In order to achieve his goal, “Labubna” put together an imaginative theatrical performance. In many ways his literary work can be compared with the creation of a play in a theater. The play was based on ancient traditions and well-known characters, but they speak contemporary lines. As a historical play it talks about the past, but its message is directed to a contemporary audience. In the following sections we will examine the late ancient dialect of the main characters and the backdrop of the story looking for traces of Hellenic political influence in the text. In other words, we will try to image the partisan and political context in which the legend functioned during the later part of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, the time when “Labubna” must have collected and put in writing the Syriac version. The point will be to suggest who might have benefited from the representation put forward in the legend.

Costumes

The main characters in the story, king Abgar and the apostle Addai, come from classical times. The one is presented as the ruler of a small but independent

¹⁸ See Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: the Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth Century Iran* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

principality, a contemporary of the Roman emperor Tiberius. The other is a healer, a missionary, a wandering holy man, and, most importantly, one of the disciples of Jesus. Let us explore the possibility that their relationship depicts the newly acquired role of provincial bishops, who, while expressing the triumph of the new faith over the old traditions, play the role of an influential local notable connected with old families and who operate as “one of us.”

The decision of “Labubna” to dress the relationship between a provincial bishop and the civilian governor in the garb of classical antiquity is neither a deliberate treachery nor the confusion of a mind lacking historical consciousness.¹⁹ Rather it is an example of a popular political strategy in antiquity to present all political change as rooted in the past even as the restoration of that past.²⁰ This kind of politics is based on a romantic ideal that everything was better and more authoritative in the past. For example, when Augustus was creating a new political system, which in many ways was his personal dictatorship, he referred to his reforms as the restoration of the Republic. When Constantine fought under the banner of Christianity against his pagan opponents, he portrayed his efforts as the restoration of old liberties and

¹⁹ The civil authority of the kings of Edessa was replaced in the middle of the third century by that of the governor (ἐπιστάτης της πόλεως). We have no certain record of the names of the governors of Edessa except for the year 449 and for the period covered by ‘Joshua the Stylite.’ The appointment of the governor was made in Constantinople. There is evidence that at least some of the governors were natives. The governor of the city was also governor of the province, Osrhoene and was called by the local people by the Greek term ἡγεμῶν, transliterated into Syriac. His residence was the *praetorium* located probably in the Citadel, which previously had been the residence of the kings. Segal, *Edessa*, 119-120.

²⁰ ‘We can sense the tacit realignment of the governing class in innumerable small but revealing details. Even developments that could be presented, with good reason, as novel features of the rise of Christianity came to be expressed in a language that had not broken with the past.’ Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in the Late Antiquity* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 119.

the eternal Roman struggle against tyranny. When emperor Theodosius I was practically establishing Christianity as the official religion, he argued that he was only giving Christian monks and bishop the rights traditionally given to every educated Roman notable, the right of free speech (παρρησία). In short, people living in late antiquity believed that the things had always been as they were in their time. Even when they had to acknowledge change, the change was not about creating new things but restoring the old. All the pieces of the puzzle were already there, and they just needed to be reshuffled and redistributed in a slightly different pattern.

In contrast, modern scholars have often seen late antiquity as the time of catastrophic dilution of the religious ideas of an enlightened minority by the beliefs of the more primitive majority, especially when this majority is led by rural monks and their wandering followers.²¹ This view also assumes a sweeping change between the open-minded Classical Greco-Roman culture and the degenerate Late Ancient or Byzantine culture.²² “Labubna”, the late-fourth-century compiler of the Abgar legend and presumably a member of local “enlightened” aristocracy, certainly did not see any break between Classical and late antiquity. Quite to the contrary, he uses freely the characters and the motifs from Silver Age of Rome to present them to his Late Ancient audience. His approach to the Classical past speaks in favor of the second option, which sees

²¹ This is a classic interpretation proposed by Michael Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).

²² E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 37: ‘If it be possible to measure the interval between the philosophic writings of Cicero and the sacred legend of Theodoret, between the character of Cato and that of Simeon (the Stylite), we may appreciate the memorable revolution which was accomplished in the Roman empire within a period of five hundred years.’

continuity of cultural traditions, as well as change, from Classical to late antiquity.²³

“Labubna” portrays not only the ruler and the bishop, but also a third set of players in the civic life, namely the curial class, the upper middle class of late ancient cities. The apostle make converts almost exclusively among the local aristocracy, the class that saw its sons and daughters leave the bounds of an affluent home and exchange it for ascetic life and the company of famous holy men of Syria. Most of the apostle’s followers, “teachers of the gospel,” are recruited from these circles, including the writer of the story, “Labubna”. In fact, the king and the apostle do not act alone, but as leaders of a group. The king is the first among the noble families as the apostle is first among his companions, future presbyters of the Church. The first group represents men in power, the second the holy men and the Church.

Furthermore, a powerful political web surrounding the late ancient holy men influenced the role of a local bishop.²⁴ A Christian missionary, a wandering ascetic, who by the city dwellers in Syria was often identified with semi-nomadic Bedouins, comes into the midst of urban aristocracy and converts their leader to his religion. While the ruler is represented as a powerful patron of wondering ascetics, the power of the apostle does not conform to the usual picture of

²³ The social change, which was slowly transforming urban centers of the East, did not come as a consequence of Christianity. ‘Rather the Christian Church, now irreversible implicated in the life of the eastern cities, changed with them.’ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 119.

²⁴ For example, bishop Barses of Edessa (361-378), appointed bishop probably because of Julian’s desire to choose the most radical men for the leading positions, banished in 373 under Valens and died in exile, was a typical example of the Syriac holy men, uncompromising both as a monk and as a bishop. His involvement in local politics is the mirror image of the theatrical engagement of his more famous Orthodox ally, Athanasius.

powerful patron and helpless client. Both sides hold power and exchange it. The bishop, portrayed in our text as an apostle, has power because the blessing of God falls on the man whose case the holy man accepts, and the vengeance of God falls on the man whose case the holy man rejects.²⁵ In late antiquity, rulers could forget this commonly held belief only at their own peril. A bishop's goal was to prove that he was a holy man, and if his flock acknowledged that, he would be able to acquire considerable political power.

When dealing with the relationship between the holy men and those in power, historians provide us with two models. The one explains the popularity of the holy man as a product of oppression, often attributed by social historians to East Roman society.²⁶ The holy man is seen as the protector of and the spokesman for the oppressed in the corrupt world of late antiquity, characterized by an invisible network of a few powerful patrons and many helpless clients. The rebellion of the holy men is seen as a reaction to the alleged gross corruption of the Church after the conversion of Constantine.²⁷ Here we will adopt the other position, that of Peter Brown, who sees the role of the holy men in the institution of patronage as a two-way street, a marketplace for the "needs" of both clients and patrons, a place where each group can "buy" what it lacks for the "price" determined by "supply and demand." Brown rejected the idealized and

²⁵ Brown, "Holy Man in Late Antiquity", 122.

²⁶ For example, Warren Treadgold still follows the old school that saw Eastern Roman society as one where a boorish military pulled all the strings. "By the mid-fifth century, easterners had more in common with each other than ever before. They had come to share a more uniform and intrusive government, a majority religion, certain cultural characteristics, and somewhat more unified economy." Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 103.

²⁷ R. M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

exceedingly asymmetrical picture of a powerful patron and helpless client in favor of a more balanced model where both patron and client are in possession of something that the other side needs. The patron needs legitimacy, which can be acquired only when a holy man affirms his prestige. The holy man obtains protection for his flock from the powerful hand of the late ancient administration and at the same time offers to the patron a guarantee that the flock will be loyal.

In the case of Syria we are fortunate to have ample information about the patron-client relationship between the holy men and the men in power. Information is available from both sides of the equation. Libanius (314 – 392) in his *De Patrociniis* describes patronage from the point of view of the urban aristocracy.²⁸ Theodoret (393 – 466) in his *Historia Religiosa* provides us with a series of vivid descriptions of contemporary Syrian holy men, which often include their dealings with the men in power. Using mainly these two sources, in addition to archeological evidence, Peter Brown analyzed the relationship between patrons and holy men, and his conclusions will serve us here as the starting point.²⁹

In the fourth century a crisis occurred in the institution of patronage as it was conventionally conceived. Members of the urban aristocracy, the mostly pagan curial class, were still the largest group of landowners of the Empire. Class

²⁸ The Greek text can be found in A. F. Norman, *Libanius, Selected Works*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977). Libanius was a Greek rhetorician who embodied many ideals and aspirations of the pagan Greek urban upper classes of late antiquity. He came from the curial family and had a successful career at the imperial court. Among his pupils were John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, third edition, s. v. Libanius.

²⁹ Brown, "Holy Man in Late Antiquity", 80-101.

decorum obliged an urban aristocrat like Libanius to be the “protector” of the peasants, their προστάτης. It becomes obvious from reading his endless complaints that the patronage is being exercised by the “wrong people”; he possessed neither the power nor the willingness to engage in the time-consuming institution of patronage.³⁰ Patronage became a commodity that was traded on the open market, and the urban aristocracy ceased to have exclusive rights and privileges. In the search for clients, the urban landowner was outflanked first by the military officer and then by the powerful bishop or abbot.

In the *Teaching of Addai* we are surrounded by urban aristocracy, the very class that was expected to be the source of patronage yet was unable to fulfill this vital part of its role in the society.³¹ “Labubna’s” narrative offers a way out of the crisis. Represented by the apostle Addai, the church acts as a mediator between the ruler and the aristocratic families. Addai can certify that king Abgar is an esteemed patron, a powerful protector of his clients, a man worthy of allegiance and deserving loyalty. The apostle’s praise of the ruler is not a toothless panegyric delivered by a subservient bishop. In the text the apostle plays the role of a mediator between the ruler on the one hand and the curial class on the other. He passes on to the governor the consent of the curial class and acts as a liaison between the two sides. In return for securing the consent of powerful families, the church herself receives protection. Since most of the

³⁰ Libanius, *Or.* XLVII, 6-7.

³¹ The gathering of the whole city to hear the apostle provides Labubna with a great opportunity to describe all the social classes of the city. At the top is aristocracy (רשנא וחארא דמלכ) followed by military officers. Urban middle class – laborers and craftsmen – comes next. Jews, pagans, and citizens of neighboring cities fall on the bottom.

disciples of the apostle come from the curial class, the urban aristocracy is assured of its place in the Church, the institution that grew to be an important power broker in the society. By sending their sons to become “teachers of the gospel” who will be part of this new power broker, the curial families are also able to maintain their prestige in the society at large. Christianity changed Roman society much less that is often claimed!³²

As in any other idealized representation, “Labubna” does not fail to contrast two types of patronage: King Abgar is a good patron; his son Manu is not. Abgar provides for the church. First he builds a meeting place and then he provides ample subsidies and endowments for the clergy, saying, “For those who become teachers in this gospel, I am ready to give to them large gifts in order that they might have no other work in addition to the ministry.”³³ His son and successor Manu does the opposite; he attempts to take from the Church by saying to Aggai, Addai’s successor, “make for me a tiara of gold as you formerly made for my fathers.” A close reader must have noted that throughout the text Aggai is consistently and repeatedly called “Aggai, the maker of royal silks and tiaras.” The end of the story provides the explanation for the strange persistence of

³² Refuting the common misconception that Roman Empire drastically changed with the conversion of Constantine, Peter Brown writes: “The eastern empire became a more markedly Christian state, but little change had occurred in the profane structures that supported its civic life. When these structures changed, as they did in the coming centuries, this cannot be said to have happened as a result of the impact of Christianity. Rather, the Christian church, now irreversible implicated in the life of eastern cities, changed with them.” Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 119.

³³ TA 64. Subsidies provided to the Church of Edessa by Abgar look exactly like the grants given by Constantine. According to Theodoret, Constantine issued general instruction to all provincial governors to allocate annual grants in each city for the support of ‘virgins, widows, and the clergy.’ Theodoret, *HE* 1.11. Julian, naturally cancelled the grants, but they were reinstated by Jovian.

“Labubna.” Aggai refuses to make “the tiara of evil.”³⁴ Why such a violent reaction? Is there anything wrong with a local notable asking the bishop to make a special gift for the inauguration? The bishop was, after all, a jeweler, goldsmith, and silk merchant by vocation.

What Manu wants is that Aggai returns to his old profession of silversmith and goldsmith. This is exactly what Julian attempted to do, to make things be as they were before Christian bishops started to interfere in politics.³⁵ Manu’s request was not unusual, because it was customary for local authorities to require guild members to provide services for the benefit of the city.³⁶ He was simply following the traditional prerogatives of local authorities to expect compulsory service (*munera*) from the members of local guilds (*collegiati*).³⁷ What he was not aware of is that, after the Constantinian reforms, it was not wise to treat a local bishop as a guild member.

In return, Aggai calls Manu a tyrant and undermines his legitimacy as a ruler. The argument he gives in the text is just a locally colored variant of the speeches given by the bishop of the capital city, John Chrysostom. Evaluating good and bad kings, Chrysostom describes a good king as “a king who truly rules over

³⁴ TA 100.

³⁵ Julian writes with his usual dose of cynicism: “I have ordered that all their funds, namely that belong to the Church of the people of Edessa, are to be taken over that they may be given to the soldiers, and that its property be confiscated to my private purse. This is in order that poverty may teach them to behave properly and that they may not be deprived of that heavenly kingdom for they still hope.” Julian’s cynicism reveals his inability to turn back the clock. Julian *Ep.* 43 (40).

³⁶ The rules regarding corporations of craftsmen were very strict. The compulsory inheritance meant that the son was supposed to inherit the work of the father, and the only exception was either priestly ordination or monastic tonsure. The western emperor Valentinian III (425-455) saw it necessary to forbid guild members to take orders in the church. See Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 861.

³⁷ See Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 858-860.

anger, and envy, and pleasure,” and a bad one as “one who seems to rule over men, but who is enslaved to anger and to the lover of power and pleasures.”³⁸ Both Aggai and John Chrysostom paid a heavy price for this kind of rhetoric, but the powers of a bishop could not easily be disregarded or ignored.³⁹ With the Senate all but gone as a powerful political player on the imperial level and the phasing out of the curial power on the local level, the bishops, with their presbyters locally and their synods universally, asserted themselves as power brokers and attempted to fill the gap.⁴⁰

By using the contrast between the tiara of gold and the tiara of evil, “Labubna” is using a highly symbolic language, especially when one has in mind the importance of clothing imagery in the Syriac tradition.⁴¹ The symbolic meaning of the tiara and numerous Biblical metaphors that it evokes might be easy to miss, even though it is probably central for the political philosophy of “Labubna”. The ruler is elected because of his virtues, and if he is found lacking in that area he is not a divinely sanctioned ruler. The tiara is the visible sign conferred by the Church on the ruler and it is a guarantee of ruler’s piety, a virtue that is the

³⁸ John Chrysostom, *Comparatio Regis et Monachi*. PG 47, 319-386. Tr. D. Hunter, *A Comparison between a King and a Monk* (Lewiston, NY, 1988).

³⁹ For the rising political influence of the bishops in the late ancient society see H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ The Senate in the fourth century had 2000 members, but this was doubled by the creation of another Senate in Constantinople. Its role was miniscule, since only fifty senators constituted quorum for resolutions. On the local level, we learn from numerous laws that the city councilors often tried to flee from their municipal responsibilities, which included collecting imperial taxes and performing a number of public duties (*munera*). Karl Christ, *The Romans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 190-191.

⁴¹ See Sebastian Brock, “Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression In Syriac Tradition” in Margot Schmidt, *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1982), 11-38.

ultimate source of all other royal virtues, and especially the ability of a ruler to exercise self-control and moderate his rage.⁴²

The tiara of gold and the tiara of evil (חודא דדהבא חודא דבישתא) are symbolical expressions comparable to the Biblical term “royal majesty” (הוד מלכות), because the tiara is the visible expression of divine favor. The reception of “royal majesty” makes the difference between a ruler who is approved by God and the tyrant. In the Biblical tradition it is associated with king Solomon who is elected king by the assembly of warriors and anointed by Zadok the priest. At the point of Solomon’s election and anointing, God bestows on him “royal majesty.”⁴³

The “royal majesty” that Abgar’s son Manu tries to obtain by force can be obtained for free at baptism. That is how his father got it, but Manu lacks his father’s humbleness, and self-control and shows no respect for the holy men. “Labubna” here makes two steps in his use of Biblical metaphors. He connects the royal garment with the garment of glory that Adam had to cast off after the fall. The starting point for all later interpretation is Gen 3:21, understood to imply two sets of clothing, the garment of glory and the garment of skin. The Targumim understand the garment of glory to refer to the priestly and royal robes that were handed down by way of Seth to future generations. Christian Syriac writers also believed that this priestly and royal robe of glory is restored at baptism.

“Labubna” underlines the difference between a ruler who can control his rage and one who cannot. Socrates preserves a story from Edessa around 372-73

⁴² As comparison one can look at the tractate on the virtues of the emperor Theodosius II written by the church historian Socrates, *HE*, vii, 22.

⁴³ 1 Ch 29:25. In addition Dan 11:21 reads that a usurper is never given ‘royal majesty’.

and involving all the same kinds of players as those included by “Labubna” in the Abgar legend. The story is about the conflict between the emperor Valens, an Arian, and the orthodox populace of Edessa, with the city governor caught in the middle. The person missing from Socrates’ account is the local bishop, but the omission illustrates the expected role of a bishop in a city like Edessa. The main point of the story is about the rage of those in power and the role that the Church might have in pacifying that rage and resisting it if so required. Here is the passage from Socrates:

But we must here mention certain circumstances that occurred at Edessa in Mesopotamia. There is in that city a magnificent church dedicated to St. Thomas the Apostle, wherein, on account of the sanctity of the place, religious assemblies are incessantly held. The Emperor Valens wishing to inspect this edifice, and having learnt that all who usually congregated there were opposed to the heresy which he favored, he is said to have struck the governor with his own hand, because he had neglected to expel them thence also. As the governor after submitting to this ignominy, was most unwillingly constrained to subserve the emperor's indignation against them, - for he did not desire to effect the slaughter of so great a number of persons, - he privately suggested that no one should be found there. But no one gave heed either to his admonitions or to his menaces; for on the following day they all crowded to the church. And when the governor was going towards it with a large military force in order to satisfy the emperor's rage, a poor woman leading her own little child by the hand hurried hastily by, on her way to the church, breaking through the ranks of the governor's company of soldiers. The governor, irritated at this, ordered her to be brought to him, and thus addressed her: “Wretched woman! Where are you running in so disorderly a manner?” She replied, “To the same place that others are hastening.” “Have you not heard,” said he, “that the governor is about to put to death all that shall be found there?” “Yes,” said the woman, “and therefore I hasten that I may be found there.” “And where are you dragging that little child?” said the governor: the woman answered, “That he also may be made worthy of martyrdom.” The governor on hearing these things, conjecturing that a similar resolution actuated the others who were assembled there, immediately went back to the emperor, and informed him that all were ready to die in behalf of their own faith. He added that it would be preposterous to destroy so many persons at one time, and thus persuaded the emperor to control his wrath. In

this way were the Edessans preserved from being massacred by order of their sovereign.⁴⁴

The passage clearly indicates how dangerous was the political game played by the apostle Addai.⁴⁵ “Labubna” reminds us of that fact when he describes the gruesome death of Addai’s successor Aggai. Manu broke Aggai’s legs in the church while he was officiating.

Comparison can also be made between the intemperate heretic emperor and the prudent governor of Edessa who finds a way not to execute innocent civilians. “Labubna” draws exactly the same contrast to emphasize the difference between the wise and temperate king Abgar and the lack of self-restraint shown by his son Manu. The readiness of Aggai, the bishop of Edessa, to die for his refusal of the direct order from the civil authority tells much about how Christians such as “Labubna” understood the nature of civic authorities, and in particular it gives us details of how they saw the limitations of a Christian monarchy. One can easily be deceived by the panegyric tone of the text and all the praises showered on the pious king Abgar. The decision of “Labubna” to end the text with martyrdom makes the panegyric found in previous episodes looks like an empty praise out of courtesy, so common in the baroque style of political rhetoric.

⁴⁴ Socrates, *HE* 4.18. Socrates gives the moral point directly, without being bogged down in the details of the story. The account preserved in Theodoret (*HE* 4.14-15) is much more comprehensive and fuller with facts. It provides us with information that Barses, bishop of Edessa 363-373, was already exiled by Valens before this incident and that an Arian bishop presided at the time of the event. In addition to the heroism of the anonymous woman, he describes in detail the behavior of a local presbyter Eulogius, who, after the ascension of the Orthodox emperor Theodosius in 378, will have become the next bishop of Edessa.

⁴⁵ About the same incident Ephrem writes: “The doors of her homes Edessa left open when she went forth with the pastor to the grave, to die, and not depart from her faith. Let the city and fort and building and houses be yielded to the king; Our goods and our gold let us leave; So we part not from our faith.” It seems that he, unlike Socrates and Theodoret, speaks about the bishop – ‘the pastor’ – taking part in the incident.

Aggai's response to the unjust request from the ruler is essentially the same as that of the anonymous mother described in the passage above. In its essence, this is the old Stoic fatalistic call to martyrdom in the face of a tyrant; you have power to take my life, but not my freedom, which is a gift from God.⁴⁶

Monarchy was a latecomer in the Roman world, and philosophers and political theorists had to come up with a satisfactory theory of kingship. Its purpose was to reassure citizens that their rights would not be infringed by the institution. To answer traditional Roman fears of tyrannical rule, political theory made the distinction between the king and the tyrant. Christians added very little to this stream of political philosophy, which became prevalent after the establishment of the principate. Already Plato wrote that legislation is an attempt to apply divine reason to the details of social life.⁴⁷ Who else can better accomplish this task than a monarch full of virtue? The list of virtues expected from a monarch is a commonplace in Greco-Roman literature. Most often listed are the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. The Christian contribution to the traditional moralistic discourse is an additional emphasis on philanthropy, which is ultimately the foundation of all virtues.⁴⁸ The legitimate king is virtuous; the tyrant lacks virtue and therefore lacks legitimacy.

⁴⁶ To a tyrant a philosopher is supposed to say, 'It is not possible that that which is by nature free should be disturbed or thwarted by anything but itself' and 'How can you be my master? Zeus has set me free. You are, however, master of my dead body, take it!' Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.19.4-10.

⁴⁷ In the *Republic* (713e) he writes of 'law' (νόμος) as the 'distribution' (διανομή) of reason (νοῦς).

⁴⁸ This list is taken from Sozomen's praise of Theodosius II and it is the commonplace among Church Fathers. See Sozomen, *HE*, VII.22 and cf. Ambrose *De Off. Min.*, 1.29.142. The claim that faith is the foundation was also not exclusively Christian. Cicero in *De Off.* 1.7.23 writes that 'the foundation of justice is faith (*fides*)', but the Christian Fathers added a new meaning to Cicero's 'good faith' among fellow citizens. It became the declaration of faith, piety (ευσέβεια).

Because of his virtuous character the monarch will act with temperance and due self-restraint and will not infringe on personal liberty of his subjects. The fact that Manu, Abgar's son, has no control over his temper is an indication of his illegitimacy as a ruler.

Support from the church and all its guarantees about the candidate's virtues were not enough to assure the most important thing in the election of a ruler, namely support from powerful families, local power brokers. As king Solomon was first elected by the assembly of warriors, so in late antiquity, even in the case of direct royal appointments, the attitude of local power brokers was essential not only for successful election but also for the successful tenure of any official. Although this area of politics seems to be outside possible Church involvement, "Labubna" presents the picture of a close relationship between Addai, the holy men, and the local power brokers. All of Addai's followers are sons of the prominent families.

Backdrop

The backdrop of the Abgar legend consists of two parts. First, "Labubna" paints the king of Edessa against the backdrop of the international political scene, as an important player, a person who corresponds with emperors and kings. The second backdrop is the city of Edessa, with its mixed population of Jews, Christians, and pagans. The most important message that the reader is to get from the legend of Abgar is that all the rival religious groups have been

eliminated by the success of Christian missionaries. The fact that their patron, king Abgar, is a successful international diplomat tells the local population which party can “deliver the goods” to the people. The legend is a part of what Peter Brown called “Christian discourse of triumph.”⁴⁹ Nonetheless, we can pierce through the backdrop on several occasions and realize that not everyone converted to Christianity with the arrival of the apostle Addai.

“Labubna” reflects the division of the empire into prefectures, dioceses, and provinces, with the respective ecclesiastical divisions. A prefecture was led by a prefect in civil matters and by a patriarch in ecclesiastical matters, a diocese by a vicar and an archbishop, and a province by a governor and a metropolitan bishop.⁵⁰ The system was introduced by Diocletian and Constantine and historians had often characterized the systemic reforms introduced and implemented by these two ideologically opposed emperors as a transition from a commonwealth of independent cities to a unitary state.⁵¹ In looking at the text, one gets the impression that “Labubna” is not quite certain how to represent the Roman world in the distant past. He simply assumes that the world created by Diocletian and Constantine always existed and shuffles only a few pieces of information he possesses about classical antiquity.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 128-129.

⁵⁰ The tripartite hierarchy is a simplification of the real picture, but it well illustrates the simplified representation presented by Labubna. In reality the civic and ecclesiastical structure was much more complex because there were often several bishops in an ecclesiastical province and the boundaries of ecclesiastical units did not coincide always with the political boundaries. See Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 373-7.

⁵¹ T. D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

We are fortunate to possess the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a complete register of offices, apart from municipal ones, which existed in the Roman Empire at the close of the fourth century. Since we are interested in the reception of our Syriac text in approximately the same period, we will compare the depiction of imperial administration in the text with the description in *Notitia Dignitatum*.⁵² Naturally at the top of the pyramid is the emperor, Tiberius, whom “Labubna” always calls our Lord Caesar (מרן קסר). Second in command is Claudius, whom “Labubna” presents as the junior member of the imperial college and calls him “the second in the kingdom” (תרינא מלכותא). “Labubna” also mentions Gaius as a member of the imperial college, together with Tiberius and Claudius, who one assumes would be the emperor Caligula. He is described as an official whose duty was to “guard the districts around Caesar,” which in all probability corresponds to the office of the Praetorian Prefect.⁵³ One should not confuse this title with the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, an important decision-making officer in the early empire. “Labubna” seems to be talking about the much more influential post of the Praetorian Prefect of the East, whose role could be described as a deputy emperor, who combined the duties of chief of staff, adjutant-general, and quartermaster-general, to whom all the vicars of the dioceses were responsible.⁵⁴ In short, “Labubna” has placed three successful emperors from the classical

⁵² The official Syriac titles of the dignitaries are most often Greek loan words. Since the *Notitia Dignitatum* is in Latin, it is often very difficult to find the exact counterpart translating from Syriac to Greek and then to Latin.

⁵³ נאִיס דִּין פְּנִיתָא דְחִדְרוּהִי דִּילָה דְקֶסֶר נְתָר

⁵⁴ Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 371.

times, Tiberius, Gaius (Caligula), and Claudius, in the frame of the late ancient imperial college.

Coming down to the level of prefectures and dioceses, we find “honorable Sabinus,” the governor, who is in charge of Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and all the country of Mesopotamia. The territory under his control corresponds to the diocese of *Oriens*, one of the twelve dioceses introduced by Diocletian’s reorganization of the provincial administration.⁵⁵ “Labubna” addresses him by his Greek title ἐπίτροπος – governor of our lord Caesar (אפטרפא דמרן קסר), which would correspond to the diocesan vicar. In the East, however, vicars of the dioceses of Egypt and Oriens were not addressed as vicars, but were known by their special titles, *Praefectus Augustalis* and *Comes Orientis*.⁵⁶

On the level of provinces, we find a governor like Pontius Pilate being addressed as ηγεμῶν (פילטוס הגמונא), which is just a Syriac transliteration of the appropriate Greek term. People of Edessa addressed their governor in the same way.⁵⁷ We also find that when a provincial governor like Pilate had to send a message to the upper levels of administration, this message did not go to the emperor himself, as it was during the principate, but to an intermediary official.

⁵⁵ Diocletian included Egypt and Libya in the diocese of *Oriens*, but Valens (364-378) later separated those two to form the diocese of *Aegyptus*, thus raising the number of dioceses to thirteen. Further subdivisions in Italy and Greece increased the number to fifteen. Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 373.

⁵⁶ Idem.

⁵⁷ Segal, *Edessa*, 120.

“Labubna” calls him ὁ πραιποσίτος (הופרכא), and this post would correspond probably to the Praetorian Prefect of the East, the emperor’s chief civilian minister.⁵⁸

In order to create the image of Abgar as a player on the international scene, “Labubna” introduces several letter exchanges into his text. The correspondence between Jesus and Abgar cannot be attributed to “Labubna,” but the exchange of letters between Tiberius and Abgar, and between Abgar and king Narses of Assyria represent more of a literary formula introduced by “Labubna.” The formula is very effective in building the picture of royal authority, because it is reminiscent of days when Aramaic was the chancery language of the Persian Empire.⁵⁹ By using the imagery known to his readers to have originated in the glory days of the Aramaic-speaking people, “Labubna” is making one more effort to include the Syriac-speaking Christians of Edessa under the fold of the Orthodox Roman Empire.

Turning now to the second level of the backdrop we shall look closely at “Labubna’s” representation of life in the city of Edessa. First, we shall look at Jewish-Christian relations; second, at the relationship among various Christian groups. Traditional cults of Edessa will be excluded because “Labubna” presents them, more or less, as they were. Here and in the previous chapter we have seen that “Labubna’s” favorite literary strategy is to combine contemporary

⁵⁸ William Fairley, *Notitia Dignitatum*, in *Translations and Reprints from Original Sources of European History*, Vol. VI:4 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, n.d.), 5-7.

⁵⁹ Syriac is nothing more than a dialect of Aramaic and the letter imagery was especially popular among its writers from the early imperial Aramaic phase. See Sebastian Brock, “Some Aspects of Greek Words in Syriac” in A. Dietrich, *Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturgebiet. Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch Historische Klasse, Dritte Folge*, 96 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975).

images with the little information he had about the past. He had no reason to lessen the number of pagans in Edessa, because that would undermine the successes of the apostle Addai, whose mission was to convert a pagan king of the city and its pagan population.

Judaism had a long presence in Mesopotamia ever since the destruction of the first Temple, but after the failure of Julian to reestablish the traditional cults, the position of the Jews in Roman Mesopotamia began to deteriorate. First, the vital link for the Jewish community, the Silk Road, which runs through Edessa towards Nisibis and further east across the Tigris to Adiabene, was broken. In 363 Nisibis lost its Christian population, even though it withstood repeated Persian sieges vividly described by Ephraim.⁶⁰ All the valiant effort of the defenders of Nisibis was taken away by the diplomatic maneuvering of Julian's successor, the hard-pressed Jovian. Christians in Roman Mesopotamia, especially people like Ephraim who emigrated from Nisibis, did not forget that the Jews in Nisibis sided with the Persians. On the other hand, the Jewish population of Edessa was cut off from the more powerful communities in Nisibis and further east in Adiabene. Very soon Christians found a way to "encourage" the Jews to leave Roman Mesopotamia.

In 388 a Christian mob led by an overzealous bishop burnt the synagogue at Callinikos, a city on the Euphrates some seventy miles south of Edessa. When

⁶⁰ During the third siege in 350, Shapur's engineers turned the river out of its course in order to flood the city as Ephrem describes (in *Carmina Nisibena* speaking as Nisibis): "All kinds of storms trouble me and you have been kinder to the Ark: only waves surrounded it, but ramps and weapons and waves surround me. O Helmsman of the Ark, be my pilot on dry land! You gave the ark rest on the haven of a mountain, give me rest in the haven of my walls."

the incident was reported to emperor Theodosius, his first instinct was to order the culpable party, particularly the bishop, to rebuild the Jewish house of prayer. Theodosius, having the Roman legal tradition behind him, knew that the empire must be based on the universal enforcement of the law, regardless of personal convictions. Any previous emperor, Christian or pagan, would have reacted the same way, because emperors know very well what can happen to a state that lets criminals walk away with impunity. The synagogue at Callinicos would have been rebuilt were it not for the ambitious bishop of Milan, often praised for inventing the spectacle of public penance of politicians. Ambrose put the question to Theodosius in very blunt terms: "Which is more important, the rule of law or the cause of religion?"⁶¹ Theodosius backed down, and this was unusual because emperors rarely side with the mob. What happened? Previous emperors were not afraid of a bishop who threatened them with eternal damnation. Ambrose offered a good excuse, slim on legal grounds, but powerful in the eyes of a mob seeking vengeance: the Jews did the same to Christians during Julian's attempts at the restoration of paganism. Offering to the emperor a way out, he writes:

If I were to talk in terms of the law of the people [*iure gentium*] I would say how many basilicas of the Church the Jews burned in the time of Julian's rule: two at Damascus, of which one has barely been repaired, but at the expense of the Church not the Synagogue; the other basilica lies in squalid ruins. Basilicas were burned in Gaza, Ascalon, Berytus, and almost everywhere in that area, and not one sought revenge. A basilica was also burned at Alexandria by pagans and Jews.

⁶¹ Ambrose, *Ep.* 40, 6-7.

The effect of a synagogue demolition going unpunished must have been devastating for the Jews in the whole of Roman Mesopotamia, including Edessa. The effect of the decision was that *Romanitas* was identified with Christianity, and non-Christians were deprived of the many rights granted by the Roman citizenship.⁶²

Was there ever a synagogue in Edessa?⁶³ We know that after the conversion of Constantine people began to wear their religion on their sleeves, and not only Christians but also Jews began to build highly visible public structures as their houses of prayer. A typical story about a synagogue in late antiquity goes like this: a second- or early-third-century private house is converted to serve as a synagogue. A large basilica-like structure is built in the fourth century, only to be converted into a church in the fifth or the sixth century.⁶⁴ In Edessa we cannot identify the building, but we know that bishop Rabbula (411-435) converted a synagogue into the church dedicated to St. Stephen, a man depicted in the Acts

⁶² Judaism itself was and always remained legally sanctioned religious practice. In a letter to the *Comes Orientis* the emperor Theodosius writes, 'It is sufficiently established that the sect of the Jews is prohibited by no law. We are therefore gravely disturbed by the interdiction imposed in some places on their assemblies. Your Sublime Magnitude shall, upon reception of this order, repress with due severity the excess of those who presume to commit illegal deeds under the name of the Christian religion and attempt to destroy and despoil synagogues.' A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit and Jerusalem, 1987), XVI, 8, 9. The emperors were often hard pressed to stem the tide of popular Christian feelings. Fergus Millar, "The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora between Paganism and Christianity, AD 312-438" in Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak, *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1992), 117.

⁶³ Three grave inscriptions in Hebrew lettering are reported from Edessa. One of them has a parallel Greek text identifying the persons buried there as Jews, and is thought to be of the early third century. G. H. Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul* (1907), 78. See also: Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. III.1, a new English version revised and edited by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 9.

⁶⁴ This was the fate of the large synagogues in Stobi, Apamea, and Gerasa. At Sardis the largest synagogue in the form of a basilica was closed in the seventh century. Millar, "The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora", 97-121.

of the Apostles as being stoned by the Jews.⁶⁵ The message delivered to the Jewish population of Edessa could not be clearer: Christians demanded and got compensation for an event that has occurred centuries ago, the stoning of deacon Stephen. The synagogue was confiscated. On the other hand, the Jews got no compensation whatsoever after a Christian bishop ordered the arson of the synagogue at Callinicos. In short, the principle of equality before the law was broken, and with it the primary element of the Jewish ghetto came into existence. It is not surprising that many Jews preferred the millet system on the other side of the border, which offered protection under the motto “separate but equal,” rather than the vague promises of imperial legislation.

If there was a synagogue in Edessa, why is “Labubna” silent about it? The fact is that he mentions “the house of Tobia (בית טוביא), the son of Tobia, the Jew from Palestine” (מן פלסטינא), as the place where the apostle Addai lodged before he was summoned to the royal court, is an indication of a close relationship between Jewish and Christian communities in Edessa. That “Labubna” talks in some detail about Tobia and is well aware that this “Jew from Palestine” served as an intermediary between Addai and Abgar shows that “Labubna” did not paint all Jews with the same color, but distinguished between the Jewish leadership in Palestine and a local community in Edessa.⁶⁶ Although there is not enough

⁶⁵ Recorded in *Chronicon Edessenum*, 51. See also: Segal, *Edessa*, 103.

⁶⁶ One is tempted to conclude that Labubna made the distinction between the prevalence of rabbinic Judaism in Palestine and its absence in Edessa. However, there is not enough evidence to either confirm or deny the notion that rabbinic Judaism had not yet reached Edessa. Neusner suggests that Aphrahat writing in 340s had not ‘ever met a rabbi or a Jew under rabbinical discipline and authority.’ See Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1999), 150.

evidence to identify “the house of Tobia” with the synagogue in Edessa, it is possible that “Labubna” knew about the house; it could have also been used as a synagogue, such as the one found at Dura Europos.⁶⁷

In the intercalated story of Protonice, “Labubna” implicitly contrasts the hostile relationship between Jewish and Christian communities in Palestine with the harmonious relationship between Addai and Tobias. “Labubna” squarely puts the blame on the Jewish leadership in Palestine. When queen Protonice visits Jerusalem she speaks as if James were the bishop of the city and the Jewish leaders have an equivalent position of honor in their community. Furthermore, “Labubna” seems to be quite familiar with the organization of the Jewish Patriarchate in Palestine. Following his routine literary strategy of creating an illusion of antiquity, he combines information about contemporary institutions with the information known to him from earlier sources. For example, he knows that in the New Testament Jesus is taken to court before the Jewish high priests, but he makes the High Priest look like the Jewish patriarch, the Nasi, surrounded by “chiefs and officers of the Jews” (רישא ופקודא יודיא), all subordinate to him.⁶⁸

The church, as described by “Labubna”, follows the tripartite hierarchy of power dividing the state into dioceses and provinces. The head of the Church is the bishop of the capital city, Rome, who “received the priesthood (כהותא) from Simon Cephas,” who was “the bishop (אפסקופא) of the city of Rome for twenty-five

⁶⁷ Archeological excavations under the existing mosques in Edessa are not possible, but Segal guesses that there were several synagogues in the city. Segal, *Edessa*, plan I.

⁶⁸ Labubna and Peshitta translation of the New Testament (Mk 14:53 and par.) use the same term for the office of the high priest רב כהנא, but they use different terms for the people who surround the high priest. In the New Testament these are called scribes and elders ספרא וקשישא. Labubna calls them chiefs and leaders of the Jews רישא ופקודא יודיא.

years” and “who received priesthood (כהנותא) from the Lord.” Under him is the bishop of Antioch, the bishop of the capital of the diocese of *Oriens*. Addressed as אפיסקופא דאנטיוכיא, he had been ordained by the bishop of Rome. Finally Palut, as a metropolitan bishop of Edessa, was ordained in Antioch. The picture presented by “Labubna” not only comes from the times well after the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine, but also clearly links certain apostles with certain provinces of the Roman Empire. If the empire is considered the reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, then it is through the church and through the process of laying on of hands from one bishop to another that this reflection is being materialized and the Empire consecrated.⁶⁹

The church is presented as being regulated by strict, divinely inspired rules. In his farewell speech to the priests and nobles of the city, Addai urges them to live according to the rules and regulations established by the apostles in Jerusalem. Indicative of the fact that the church in Edessa is firmly in the Roman fold are the words he uses there (טכסא ונמוסא), Syriac transliteration of the Greek terms τάξεις και νόμος. The expression is reminiscent of the legalism characteristic of the late empire, where the laws were promulgated in two ways, by imperial orders and by clarifications, *decreta*, and *rescripta*. When “Labubna” mentions rules and regulations established by the apostles in Jerusalem, he certainly has more in mind than what is preserved in the *Acts of the Apostles* about the so-called apostolic synod. Apparently “Labubna” sees the church as a well-regulated

⁶⁹ To paraphrase the famous expression of Eusebius, the empire of Constantine is the earthly reflection (*mimesis*) of the Kingdom of Heaven. Eusebius *Triakontaetrikos (Tricennelia)*, IV, 2. ed. Heikel, *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 1 (1902).

institution, in which early decisions made by the apostles were reaffirmed by the synods of their successors.

Political and cultural unification cannot be achieved without encountering some kind of dissent. The very idea that “Labubna” wants to include as many people as possible under the rubric of *Romanitas et Christianitas* implies that at least some of the Christians were not under the rubric. From several sources we get a strong indication that in the second half of the fourth century Marcionites, Manicheans, followers of Bardaisan (sometimes called Valentinians), and Arians were present in Edessa. Their presence has been demonstrated by Walter Bauer in a landmark chapter, and little has been added to his analysis.⁷⁰ Sources, in particular Ephraim’s polemic against heresies, speak of several dissenting groups in Edessa, namely, Marcionites, followers of Bardaisan, Manichaeans, and Arians.⁷¹ In fact, upon his arrival in Edessa in 363, Ephraim was appalled at the minority status accorded to the orthodox Christians, who were called Palutians by their rivals. The question that concerns us here is not their existence, but why and in which way their existence was overlooked in the literary composition of “Labubna”.

Various scholars often assigned different dates to the “final” suppression of “heresies” in Edessa. Walter Bauer believed that Qune (298? – 312) was the first orthodox bishop of Edessa and that he was instrumental in the suppression of all

⁷⁰ Stephen Gero, “With Walter Bauer on the Tigris: Encratite Orthodoxy and Libertine Heresy in Syro-Mesopotamian Christianity.” In *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, edited by Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 287-307.

⁷¹ For the translation of this work see C. W. Mitchell, trans. & ed., *S. Ephrem’s Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, 2 vols., (London: Text and Translation Society, 1912 & 1921).

the other types of Christianity. Since this is such an overwhelming and humanly impossible task, Bauer admits that Rabbula (411 – 435) had to renew the effort at suppression of dissent among Christians.⁷² Andrew Palmer argues that it was bishop Eulogius (378 – 386), appointed by the emperor Theodosius, who established uniformity in the city at the conclusion of the Arian controversy, following the example of the first deeply orthodox emperor.⁷³ Both authors consider the person most influential in the establishment of orthodoxy in Edessa, either Qune or Eulogius, to be the one who actually inspired the creation and the distribution of the Abgar legend. Our main objection to both positions is the assumption that the legend was created with a stroke of pen and through a whim of a powerful bishop. This history of reception reviewed in the previous chapter favors a process of formation rather than a single moment of creation.

There is no doubt that the Abgar legend was a powerful force for the consolidation of orthodoxy on the basis of apostolic succession of the episcopate in Edessa. It is wrong to perceive orthodoxy as something imposed on dissenters by force or to think that the bishops could wield the power of the state. Quite to the contrary, it was the quiet work of the people like “Labubna” that made all the difference. The changes in scholarly understanding of late antiquity indicate that, at that time, the state had no mechanisms of enforcing such a unity even if it wanted to.⁷⁴ A gradual merging and diminution of dissent among various

⁷² Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 42-43.

⁷³ Andrew Palmer, “Time for Killing” in *Gouden Hoorn*, volume 6, issue 1 (summer 1998).

⁷⁴ On the limitations of a pre-modern state to enforce uniformity of thought see the influential book of Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

Christian groups is probably a much better image of the whole process than the image of the powerful state's imposition of the litmus test of belief, that is, orthodoxy. The homogenization was achieved over a long period of time by persuading the majority to accept the shared memories of the past. "Labubna" provided just such a text.

The idea presented by "Labubna" of society unified under a Christian ruler and blessed by a Christian bishop, should not be taken for what it is not. It is not an accurate depiction of reality but a work of imagination that, in turn, caught the imagination of many. The fact that "Labubna" used many of the traditions from the past made his art of make-believe even more successful. When one looks at how accurate the backdrop of the story is, there is very little to persuade us that "Labubna" was a writer of a realistic kind. To illustrate the difference between the real world and the narrative world, we will use a story describing an event that took place in the sixth century. It indicates better than anything else the fluidity between orthodoxy and dissent in Mesopotamia.⁷⁵ Mar Aba, a future primate of the East, met a Christian ascetic on the banks of the Tigris River. Mar Aba asked him: Are you an Orthodox, a Marcionite, or a Jew? He answered yes to all three questions. Mar Aba was puzzled and asks: How can you be a Jew, a Christian, and a worshiper of the Messiah?⁷⁶ The monk, who had probably spent all his life living in the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia looking for a way how to worship

⁷⁵ The story is quoted by Walter Bauer as an indication of diversity of Christianity in Edessa. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 23. The Syriac translation can be found in P. Bedjan ed. *Histoire de Mar Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un pretre et deux laiques nestoriens* (Paris, 1895).

⁷⁶ In this context Christian actually means a Marcionite as the narrator of the story explains.

God, answers: “I am a Jew secretly;⁷⁷ I still pray to the living God and abhor the worship of idols. I am a Christian truly, not as the Marcionites, who falsely call themselves Christians, for Christian is a Greek word, which in Syriac means Messiah-worshiper. And if you ask me “Do you worship the Messiah?” I worship him truly.” We could not find a better story to illustrate the fluid boundaries that existed between various religious groups in Late Ancient Syria. We can also imagine that when “Labubna” was telling his version of the story of Christian origins to the interested public in Edessa many were shaking their heads in disbelief. Like Mar Aba, they must have looked amazed, but the story took hold gradually and, unlike the story of a strange Mesopotamian monk, was successful.

In conclusion we must say that “Labubna” was a skillful writer who was able to weave many traditions, coming to him from various sources and times, into a seamless web and create a skillful historical novel. His most distinctive literary strategy is to combine exotic stories about the past in the ways that harmonize with the reality of the present and give a sense of direction. We undertook the task of comparing the image with reality, not to damage or demote “Labubna’s” story, but to try to understand it. The fact that he had a clear goal in mind, the unification of the church under the banner of apostolic succession and under the protective hand of the Roman Empire, does not undermine the literary value of his story. Its popularity remains to this day.

⁷⁷ The monk actually quotes the apostle Paul here. Rom 2:29: ‘He is a Jew, who is in secret, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart.’

CHAPTER IV

THE APOLOGETIC PURPOSE OF EUSEBIUS

Eusebius – Historian and Apologist

In the previous chapter it was pointed out how “Labubna”, the late-fourth-century collector of the Abgar legend, shaped the already popular tale for the political needs of the Syrian Church in the late fourth century. Taking our pursuit of the history of reception of the Abgar legend to the late third and the early fourth century, we must ask the following question: Could we detect a similar approach in the work of Eusebius (c. 260 – c. 340), the man who first recorded the Abgar legend? As an important ecclesiastical figure, he played a major role in the events of the day and left us detailed accounts of both past and present. What kind of “imprint” has Eusebius left on the Abgar legend, and in what way did he influence the history of reception? How did he use the legend, and what function does it have in the overall scheme of the larger work of which is a part, his *Ecclesiastical History*? Finally, taking note of the fact that Eusebius was the author of the flattering and uncritical life of Constantine, we must also ask whether the political beliefs of Eusebius influenced his choice to include the legend in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

The argument developed here will be that Eusebius included the Abgar legend in his work on the history of the church for reasons of Christian

apologetics. One should look for a suitable intellectual milieu to which the text responds, taking into account that the *Ecclesiastical History* was prepared and written, by and large, during the Great Persecution (303-313). The critique of Christianity, instigated by the intellectual circles at the Diocletian's court at Nicomedia and continued during the persecution, offers the best background for the decision made by Eusebius to include the Abgar legend in the first book of the *Ecclesiastical History*.¹ If Porphyry was a part of that circle, Eusebius must have only continued the debate with Porphyry already started by his teacher Origen.² Furthermore, Eusebius was not the only one who felt the need to answer the intellectual attack on Christianity undertaken by pagan philosophical circles. Recently it has been argued that Lactantius was directly answering Porphyry's activities at the court of Nicomedia.³ The crux of the argument is that the persecution initiated by Diocletian was not only a physical but also an intellectual attack on Christianity. The gradual increase in literary activities against the Christians indicates that the conflict of cultures was serious. Toward the end of persecution the emperor Maximin Daia published the forged

¹ Lactantius, as a man who was present at the court, provides us with useful, though sketchy, information about the intellectual circle at Nicomedia. The circle launched the first known debate between Greek philosophy and Christian theology over the issue of religious toleration. See Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 91-114.

² Eusebius reports that a very thoroughly prepared attack on Christianity began with Porphyry's book *Against the Christians*, written in the times of his role model Origen (*HE* 6.19.2). The dating of Porphyry's work *Against the Christians* is heavily disputed. Barnes argues that it was written after 295. See T. D. Barnes, "Porphyry, *Against the Christians*: Date and Attribution of Fragments", *JThS*, n.s. 24 (1973), 424-43. Wilken believes that it was written during the Great Persecution. See Robert L. Wilken "Pagan Criticism of Christianity: Greek Religion and Christian Faith" in *Early Christian Literature and Classical Intellectual Tradition*, edited by William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken, (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979).

³ Digeser, *Lactantius and Rome*, 91-114.

Memoranda of Pilate. The very fact that the emperor had to resort to such an action is an indication that the culture war had already been lost for traditional religion.⁴ Eusebius was on the winning side, even though he might not have been aware of it during the persecution.

The fact that Eusebius wrote the *Life of Constantine*, and often praises the first Christian emperor without restraint, should not mislead us to think that Constantine was the formative figure in the life and work of Eusebius. It was neither the politics of Constantine's conversion nor the ideology of the first Christian Emperor that exercised the principal influence on his judgment, but an apologist's desire to respond to pagan criticism of Christianity. We believe that the best way to read the *Ecclesiastical History*, and the Abgar legend in it, is to read it as apologetic literature. Eusebius's enthusiasm for Constantine, which late in the career of Eusebius led to the writing of a laudatory life of Constantine, did not play a discernible role when he was writing the *Ecclesiastical History*. Apologetics preceded politics, because the image of an ideal Christian king such as Abgar was created before Constantine. Eusebius used the image of a pious god-fearing royal convert to compare and contrast that image to the image of irreverent and godless persecutors.⁵

On the other hand, it would be wrong to make too sharp a distinction between the apologetic role of the Abgar legend, found in the Book One of *Ecclesiastical*

⁴ HE 9.5.1.

⁵ This is not to say that the story as such does not lend itself to political use. The analysis of the previous chapter has shown that this was the case, especially in the later part of the fourth century; there we saw that the writer of the Syriac version sought to depict the city of Edessa as a part of the Roman Empire and its citizens as Romans.

History, and its political role, found in the later Syriac version. Apologetics in the time of persecution inevitably had a strong political dimension, especially during the Great Persecution (303-313) when the state combined physical violence with an organized propaganda attack.⁶ The Roman state had not taken seriously the intellectual challenge posed to it by Christianity. It was only during the Great Persecution (303-313) that the state took some measures in the cultural war that was going on. We know that the emperor Diocletian requested from a certain “priest of philosophy,” a man living in the city of Byzantium at the time, to prepare a defense of the traditional religion that could be used for repressing Christianity on the intellectual level.⁷ An additional example of the conflict on the intellectual level is the publication of the forged memoirs of Pilate, issued during the persecution by Maximin Daia, one of the tetrarchs and the one of the most vicious persecutors of Christianity.⁸ Such actions suggest the need of the Roman state not only to exterminate Christianity physically, but also to challenge its claims on the cultural and intellectual level. In the environment of anti-Christian polemics instigated from the top of the Roman government, the Abgar legend

⁶ W. H. C. Frend, “Prelude to the Great Persecution: The Propaganda War”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38 (1987), 1-18.

⁷ Henry Chadwick made an intriguing suggestion that “the priest of philosophy” was none than Porphyry (*Marc.* 4). See Henry Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus*, Texts and Studies 5 (Cambridge, 1959), 66. The suggestion was seconded by: Wilken, *Christians*, 135. Additionally, most scholars believe that Eusebius performed most of his apologetic and polemical work in response to the publication of Porphyry’s books against the Christians. The dating and the reconstruction of Porphyry’s tractates are disputed, but most scholars believe that Eusebius performed much of his apologetic and polemical work in response to the publication of Porphyry’s polemical books. Lightfoot especially emphasizes the role of Porphyry and Eusebius’ reaction to his polemics. See Lightfoot “Eusebius” in *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, 346. See also: R. M. Grant, “Porphyry among the Early Christians” in *Romanitas and Christianitas* (Amsterdam and London, 1973), 181-187.

⁸ *HE* 9.5.1

played its political as well as apologetic role, but this was still in the times prior to Constantine.

This chapter will explain the place of the Abgar legend in that polemic and, in particular, how it fits into the theory of the decline of polytheism set in motion by the establishment of the Roman Empire, a particular understanding of the history of religions espoused by Eusebius. The point argued here is that Eusebius received the legend and decided to include it in the *Ecclesiastical History* during the time of the Great Persecution (303-313), and neither the legalization of Christianity nor the personal religious experience of Constantine had a notable impact on the process. Only later, in the Syriac version of the Abgar legend, such influence begins to assert itself.

A good place to begin the discussion of the role of Eusebius in the reception of the Abgar legend is his own testimony about where and how he found the account. Eusebius was the first to record the Abgar legend and provide us with a written summary, and his statements establish that the Abgar legend circulated in a written form before he decided to write it down.⁹ According to his words, Eusebius himself discovered the account of the Abgar legend in the archives of Edessa and included it in the first book of *Ecclesiastical History*. Giving an introduction to the story, he explains how and where he came across the text:

There is also documentary evidence (ανάγραφτος μαρτυρία) of these things taken from the archives (γραμματοφυλακείον) at Edessa, which was at that time a capital city. At least, in the public documents (δημοσίοις χάρτοις) there, which contain the things done in antiquity and at the time of Abgar, these things too are found preserved from that time to this; but there is nothing

⁹ The legend must have circulated in a written as well as oral form as its indicated by the statements of Egeria (see above pp. 57-61) and the remarkable similarity between the text in Eusebius and the text in the *Teaching of Addai* indicated by Brock (see above pp. 13-19).

equal to hearing the letters themselves, which we have extracted from the archives, and when translated from the Syriac they are verbally as follows...¹⁰

Can we trust this testimony of Eusebius? If the main purpose of the Abgar legend in the overall scheme of the *Ecclesiastical History* is apologetics, the discovery of the legend in the archives seems almost too good to be true. Sebastian Brock has analyzed the historical tradition behind the Abgar legend and concluded that the origins are obscure before the late third century. For example, the document called the *Chronicle of Edessa*, a type of document expected to reside in the archives of the city, does not contain any reference to king Abgar.¹¹ Brock believes that Eusebius did not acquire the document personally from the archives of Edessa. The issue here is how to interpret the phrase “which we have extracted from the archives” (ἡμῖν αναληφθεῖσών ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχείων). Does it mean that Eusebius personally copied the text from the archives and translated it from Syriac? Brock rather believes, and we agree, that he requested someone else to do it for him. Who did it and how he came across the document remains obscure. While one can disagree about the details of the crucial phrase, the main thrust of Eusebius’s account, the statement that the legend was around before he got hold of it, should not be doubted. Because of the lack of concrete evidence, it is hard to argue that Eusebius fabricated or actively participated in the manufacturing of the Abgar legend, for historians generally appreciate the

¹⁰ *HE* 1.13.5

¹¹ Brock believes that Eusebius had used a Syriac document from Edessa, but that it is improbable that it was kept in the town’s archives and unlikely that he himself made the translation into Greek. See Brock, “Eusebius”, 223, as well as the discussion of this question above p. 13-14.

methodical thoroughness of Eusebius, even when they blame him for lack of critical judgment.¹²

Nevertheless, with regard to the inclusion of the Abgar legend in *Ecclesiastical History*, some scholars have suspected his motivation. Walter Bauer's hypothesis regarding the "discovery" of the legend expresses these allegations in the most concise way.¹³ He claims that Qune, the first "orthodox" bishop of Edessa, simply invented the story and put it in writing or made others do so. He then delivered it to Eusebius claiming that it was an authentic document taken from the archives of Edessa.¹⁴ Eusebius, according to Bauer, was a co-conspirator in the whole affair. The story was included in *Ecclesiastical History* only after Licinius issued the edict of toleration in 313 guaranteeing the free exercise of religion in the East. According to Bauer, the story is a "pure fabrication," a product of the age of Constantine "without any connection with reality," and a means, used by orthodox bishops, to suppress heresy, a means that leaves behind a "bitter taste." Eusebius bought the whole story uncritically, motivated by his desire to say something about the church in Mesopotamia, an

¹² Like modern day journalists Eusebius was not very selective. This has prompted Momigliano to say that Eusebius is the first truly modern historian. A. Momigliano, *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 90. For Eusebius history writing was something between "an exact science and an instrument of propaganda", because it is not the failure to report the event that is characteristic of Eusebius' historical method. It is the presence of, what we call today 'spin.' See A. Momigliano, "Pagan and Christian Historiography," in Jacob Neusner, ed. *The Christian and Judaic Invention of History*, AAR Studies in Religion 55 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 108.

¹³ Bauer explicitly states that this part of his argument is hypothetical when he speaks of "The tentativeness that limits all such conjectures." Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 36. Recently, Sebastian Brock has restated and updated Bauer's case in a much more moderate fashion. See Brock "Eusebius", 221.

¹⁴ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 35. He calls Qune the *spiritus rector* [guiding light] in the fabrication of the Abgar legend.

area about which he was not well informed.¹⁵ There is an element of exaggeration in Bauer's hypothesis.¹⁶ What Bauer assumed is that the legend is a typical product of the age of Constantine, the time when normative Christianity – orthodoxy – finally managed to suppress heresies with the help of the state. He imagined that the fourth century was an era when the people like Qune and Eusebius, who were willing to cooperate with the religious reforms of Constantine, compromised the Christianity of the martyrs.¹⁷

The possibilities that the Abgar legend was used as a veiled praise of Constantine, an imitation of his conversion, cannot be dismissed outright. We have shown how the legend was put to various uses, and there is no reason to exclude this one. Nevertheless, it is neither right nor fair to attribute this kind of motive to Eusebius. Quotations from various sources, Christian, Jewish, or pagan alike, point to a conscientious effort on the part of Eusebius toward correctness and historical fairness. Momigliano was inspired by this characteristic of the *Ecclesiastical History* to say that it is “truly the first modern history book.”¹⁸ Second, the connection between Eusebius and Constantine has been vastly

¹⁵ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 9.

¹⁶ Recently Sebastian Brock has struck the right balance by rejecting some of the more radical conjectures of Bauer, but preserving the valuable insights. Brock believes that the legend could be dated to the late third or the early fourth century, but that there was no mischief committed on the part of Eusebius. Brock “Eusebius”, 204.

¹⁷ There has been a significant change in the way historians understand the time of Diocletian and Constantine since the days of Walter Bauer. Constantine is now seen as one ruler among many, and not the person who single-handedly introduced the ‘dark middle ages.’ See T. D. Barnes, *The Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and *Eusebius and Constantine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

¹⁸ Momigliano, *Paganism and Christianity*, 90.

overrated.¹⁹ Constantine did not invent imperial absolutism, and Eusebius was not the first to write a laudatory life of such an emperor. Eusebius was more a disciple of Origen than he was a confidant of Constantine. He met the emperor probably only twice.²⁰ He was a scholar first and foremost, not a politician. Without evidence to the contrary it is hard to believe that Eusebius could have included the Abgar legend in his *Ecclesiastical History* with the particular intention of praising Constantine. Eusebius saw the Abgar legend as an apologetic story, evidence of the antiquity of Christianity and of the success of its founder among the pagan rulers of the region. Its main purpose was not to praise the Christian emperor of the future, but to defend the respectability of the Christian religion and its founder. When reading that pagan rulers of the past had shown immense respect to Jesus, contemporary pagans should pause and ask why they were persecuting his followers. Furthermore, the fact that a pagan ruler

¹⁹ Barnes and Ruhbach sought a more balance judgment on Eusebius and Constantine, and we follow their conclusions here. For the details of the argument see T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) and Gerhard Ruhbach, *Apologetik und Geschichte: Untersuchungen zur Theologie Eusebs von Caesarea* (Heidelberg University diss., 1962). The opinions about Eusebius are almost as diverse as those about Constantine. Peterson calls him 'a political publicist.' Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (Leipzig: Jakob Hegner, 1935). A very negative review is given by Berkhof, *Die Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea* (Amsterdam, 1939) who calls him the founder of 'Byzantinism' in the most negative sense of the word. Others have seen him through the background of Hellenistic political and philosophical speculations. See N. H. Baynes, 'Eusebius and the Christian Empire' in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London: Athlone Press, 1955), 168-72. Still other saw in Eusebius a 'political metaphysician.' See Per Beskow, *Rex Gloriarum: The Kingship of Christ in the Early Church* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962), 318.

²⁰ Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 3.

shows interest in Christianity and ultimately converts to the new faith is an indication of messianic times.²¹

Because Eusebius also recorded the story of Constantine's conversion, it is easy to compare the two from a literary standpoint and see whether art imitates life. In his *Vita Constantini* Eusebius presents the story of Constantine's conversion through a vision, comparable to Moses' vision of the burning bush before the miraculous exodus out of Egypt.²² Constantine meets his God alone, during the night, and without any intermediaries. Nobody has to lead Constantine and mediate his contact with the divine. The Abgar story tells how a ruler honored and patronized Jesus and his apostles. In their form as well as purpose the narratives are different. One exalts and glorifies; the other provides "historical evidence" that illustrates the arrival of Messianic times. The most important difference is that no apostles or other intermediaries appear in Constantine's story. The emperor wanted to make sure that he owed nothing to anyone for bringing him to faith.

Apart from formal differences, we will argue in more detail below that the time of writing makes it unfeasible to argue that Constantine was the model for Abgar. All the personal information included later in the *Vita Constantini* was not yet

²¹ Other indications of the coming of the Messiah are (1) the end of the Temple cult and (2) the end of political particularization and separatism due to the establishment of the *Pax Romana*. All of these are standard apologetic arguments known already to Clement and Origen. See Aryeh Kofsky, *Eusebius of Caesarea against Paganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 130-136.

²² About the role of Moses as a literary prototype for the portrayal of Constantine by Eusebius see Cameron, *Life of Constantine*, 34-39.

available for the *Ecclesiastical History*.²³ The Abgar legend was the product, not of the age of exuberance, the times after the conversion of Constantine, but of the times of anxiety that preceded the conversion. It is used by Eusebius as an apologetic tool in the face of persecutions.

Eusebius found a precedent for royal conversion in the work of Josephus (and possibly in other Jewish apologetic literature). Eusebius used Josephus abundantly, not only for the whole of Book One but throughout his career.²⁴ Once he had found a similar story in Josephus, it became much easier to include a relatively obscure but similar Christian story from the same region, because the Abgar story seemed more plausible. The story of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene, found in *Jewish Antiquities* XX, 17-96, not only made it possible for Eusebius to give credence to a similar pious legend of the Syrians, but also provided him with a valuable example. It is much easier to accept an apocryphal story when one sees that another respected author has done the same thing before.

Did Eusebius have other literary and historical precedents in mind beside Josephus? The apologetic strategy of Eusebius is, in many ways, a continuation of the argument made by the *Acts of the Apostles* and other early Christian

²³ The first encounter between Eusebius and Constantine occurred immediately before the council of Nicea in 325. On this occasion Constantine told the story of his vision of the Milvian Bridge to Eusebius. See Cameron, *Life of Constantine*, 2-5.

²⁴ Eusebius is of paramount importance for the appropriation of Josephus for the Christian Church, so that after the work of Origen and Eusebius 'one hears of Josephus as a kind of fifth gospel and as a little Bible.' See Heinz Schreckenberg "The Works of Josephus and the Early Christian Church" in Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata eds., *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 317.

apologists.²⁵ There is a certain literary resemblance between some episodes in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the first Christian apologetic work, and the Abgar legend.²⁶ Eusebius was well acquainted with earlier apologetic literature, Jewish as well as Christian, and quotes it often.²⁷ In many ways he represents the pinnacle of the apologetic movement. The main purpose of the apologists was to argue that, in spite of occasional misunderstandings, Christianity was actually compatible with the best ideals of the Roman Empire. The author of the *Acts of the Apostles* believed that some of the more conscientious and enlightened Roman officials such as Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus, understood that well and protected the apostles.²⁸ According to Josephus, Jewish missionaries were able to convert the ruler of Adiabene, a small Mesopotamian principality to the East of Edessa. All this evidence accumulated by Christian and Jewish apologists indicates that something important was taking place in the history of religions. It was not difficult for Eusebius to make the connection between religious and political events, and the argument served Christians well: as the Roman Emperor unified the multiplicity of nations under his protection, so the world was ready to exchange its allegiance to many deities for the faith in one God. Sergius Paulus of Cyprus, king Izates of Adiabene, king Abgar of Edessa,

²⁵ R. M. Grant, *From Augustus to Constantine: The Thrust of the Christian Movement into the Roman World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

²⁶ The similarity mentioned here should not be taken to mean that Eusebius 'manufactured' the Abgar legend according to a previously available prototype. A similar situation requires similar actions, as it was often pointed out by form critics of Early Christian literature. The literary form of the Abgar legend will further be discussed in the following chapter.

²⁷ See Kofsky, *Eusebius against Paganism*, 10-12.

²⁸ The encounter between Paul and Barnabas with Sergius Paulus is described in *Acts* 13:4-12. According to the *Acts* Sergius Paulus was the proconsul of Cyprus and "he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord."

even Constantine, are the “historical evidence” that such a process was taking place.

In our argument we will proceed in two steps. First, we will examine the apologetic strategy of Eusebius, asking how the Abgar legend fits into his “theory of religions.” We will look at two aspects of this strategy, the theory of the necessary decline of polytheism and the claim that Christianity is the only legitimate heir to the ancient Jewish traditions. The inquiry will be placed in the wider context of Eusebius’s apologetic strategy, which involved and required his reliance on the great Jewish apologist, Josephus. Second, we will examine the process of editing of the *Ecclesiastical History*, its various stages, and the political and personal circumstances that might have influenced the process.

The Abgar Legend and the Apologetic Strategy of Eusebius

We now move to analyze the apologetic strategy of Eusebius, especially as it is presented in the first book of the *Ecclesiastical History*, where we also find the story of Jesus and king Abgar. The *Ecclesiastical History* is not considered the principal apologetic work of Eusebius. Much more important among his apologetic works are *Praeparatio Euangelica* and *Demonstratio Euangelica*. However, the apologetic character of *Ecclesiastical History* has to be taken into account because, like his role model Origen, Eusebius was first and foremost the defender of the Church before Roman society at large. Arthur Droge speaks about the apologetic character of his *Ecclesiastical History*, saying:

Although Eusebius may have been the “first” to undertake the task of composing a history of Christianity (*HE* 1.1.3), the interpretation of history underpinning his work owes much to his predecessors . . . above all the Christian apologists of the second and the third centuries provided the foundation on which Eusebius constructed his interpretation of history and Christianity’s place in it.²⁹

His natural proclivity was not to foretell the future, but to explain the past and firmly place his own faith in the framework of the history of culture. Eusebius is fascinated with history, because by looking at the past he can discern the power of the One who guides history. In other words, Eusebius first looks at the evidence and then seeks how to build a narrative around it. He does not hammer the evidence into a grand narrative.³⁰ His approach is much more gentle; the grand narrative of history is a part of his style as a historian. Modern historiography, unlike its nineteenth-century predecessor, is much more willing to admit the existence of cultural presuppositions in all historical works. Eusebius should not be held to a higher standard.³¹

In Book One Eusebius begins his historical discourse with an essay on Jesus and his role in the religious history of all humankind. The introduction defines his task in both theological and historical terms. His goal is to find out what “historical

²⁹ Arthur J. Droge, “The Apologetic Dimensions of the Ecclesiastical History” in Attridge, *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, 492.

³⁰ One of the most important questions scholars have asked is the relationship between Eusebius the apologist and Eusebius the historian. Some authors believe that Eusebius the apologist had influenced the historian. In other words, Eusebius ingeniously manipulated some historical documents to support his apologetic goals. See E. Schwartz, “Eusebius” in *Pauly-Wissowa Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 1399-1402 and F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *Eusebius Pamphili* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 61-63. Others believe that apologetic elements do not infringe on Eusebius’ integrity. See Wallace-Hadrill, *Eusebius of Caesarea* (London, 1960), 165-167 and Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 128.

³¹ For a larger problem of the relationship between narrative and historical representation see Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977) and Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

preconditions” needed to be fulfilled for the time to be ripe for the incarnation of Logos.³² Two kinds of “historical evidence” for the arrival of Messianic times are indispensable to Eusebius: the gradual abandonment of polytheism, and the destruction of the legitimate line of Jewish kings and priests. In both respects, the Abgar legend plays a very important apologetic role. It is a sign of Messianic times.

Regarding the content of the apologetic plan of world history imbedded in the *Ecclesiastical History*, the doctrine of the Logos was an indispensable tool. Eusebius uses it abundantly in Book One. It provides the basis for the history of religion espoused by Eusebius, a history that largely shapes secular history as well. The Logos was the teacher of humanity throughout history, as humankind developed along the path of virtue from barbarism to civilization.³³ By looking at the progression of learning and the beneficial effects of civilization, Eusebius makes the focal point of his apologetic strategy the idea of progress. While historical events are not predetermined, they provide edification to the human race. We can learn from history how the Logos leads human civilization, especially by looking at the action of great men and sovereign rulers.³⁴ Eusebius mentions the people who are anointed, kings, priests, and prophets, because

³² Eusebius calls it: “presuppositions for the good news” (υπόθεσις της ευαγγελίας). *HE* 1.1.1.

³³ Eusebius calls the Logos “the teacher of virtues” (διδάσκαλος αρετών) *HE* 1.2.23 and “the administrator of the ineffable plan of the Father” (ο υπουργός της άρρητου γνώμης του πατρός) *HE* 1.2.3. The stages in the plan are also defined. From savagery and unbridled brutality, humanity was changed to mildness.

³⁴ This is where Eusebius departs from Origen. Both understand reality as ‘apprehension of divine truth as the indwelling of the Logos or the seeds of truth implanted in the soul.’ But Origen believes that one’s mind (νοῦς) must rise above all material things. Eusebius implies that much can be achieved by observing the ‘seminal reason’ (λόγος σπερματικός) in history. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th revised edition (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1976), 470-2.

they symbolically represent Christ, the anointed of God. The Wisdom and Word of God speak through their actions, not because they received special magical powers, but because their anointing symbolically represents their efforts to imitate the rational order of the universe.³⁵ Human civilization developed gradually from the fall of the protoplasts, through the revelation to the patriarchs, the destruction of the Jewish state, reconstruction after the Babylonian captivity, the termination of the independent Jewish kingdom, the establishment of the *Pax Romana*, the incarnation of the Wisdom of God, and the triumph of Christianity over false religions under Constantine. When we look at Eusebius in the light of ancient philosophy of history, his views were quite common in the circle of Christian and Jewish apologists.³⁶ In fact, one is not surprised when a brief look at the margins of E. Schwartz's critical edition shows the pervasiveness of quotations from the *Antiquities of the Judeans* written by Josephus.³⁷

The only problem with this tightly conceived argument was that pagan authorities were not convinced by it. Because of the nature of the argument, which concluded that all tradition cults must end, they could not be convinced in its accuracy. For the duration of the persecution Eusebius faced a serious challenge that in many ways can be compared to the challenges facing Josephus after a failed rebellion against the Roman rule. The refusal of the Roman

³⁵ Eusebius quotes Proverbs 8:15 "through me kings reign" (διὰ εμοῦ βασιλεῖς βασιλεύουσιν) *HE* 1.2.14, but he is also careful to point out that unlike Christ (Χριστός), the anointed (κεχρισμένοι) were not worshiped, nor were their followers willing to die for them. Kings, priests, and prophets are anointed only symbolically (διὰ συμβόλου κεχρισμένοι). The real presence is only manifested in Christ.

³⁶ In fact, the influence of Origen is obvious, even though Origen never showed much interest in history. Origen saw history as a gigantic training ground of souls. The exercise of human freedom, a notion central to Origen's Christian philosophy, bears fruits only slowly and gradually.

³⁷ Eusebius, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, ed. E. Schwartz, GCS IX.1 (Leipzig, 1909).

government to recognize Christianity as a legal cult seemed detrimental to the place Eusebius gave to Christianity in the framework of the history of Greco-Roman culture. During Eusebius's lifetime Porphyry's tractates were the strongest intellectual challenge to Christianity ever mounted by a supporter of the traditional Roman religion and philosophy.³⁸ After the persecution ended Eusebius devoted two sizeable apologetic works to refute Porphyry's claims, *Praeparatio Evangelica* and *Demonstratio Evangelica*. It is conceivable that before these argumentative texts were published Eusebius might have attempted to refute Porphyry's claims with some kind of provisional "narrative" argument. The first book of the *Ecclesiastical History*, which also includes the Abgar legend, might have served that purpose well.

In the context of the persecutions it was devastating when Porphyry argued that Christianity fosters sedition and undermines traditional Roman values of loyalty to the state through religious tradition, in short, *Romanitas*.³⁹

How can these people [i.e., Christians] be thought worthy of forbearance? They have turned away from those who from earliest time are referred to as divine among all the Greeks and barbarians and by emperors, lawgivers, and philosophers – all in common mind. And to what sort of penalties might they not justly be subjected who are fugitives from the things of their fathers? (*PE* 1.2.1)

³⁸ There is a general scholarly consensus that Porphyry's tractates were of great importance for the apologetic work of Eusebius, even though the debate rages over almost every aspect of the reconstruction of the Porphyry's work. Most of the genuine fragments from Porphyry's work come from Eusebius. Personal rivalry between the two men might have played a role because Porphyry was a student of Origen. Local rivalry could have been of influence as well, because Porphyry was a native of Tyre and studied in Caesarea as a young man. For the summary of scholarly opinions see Kofsky, *Eusebius Against Paganism*, 17-25. Porphyry's tractates did not survive, but Harnack tried to reconstruct it. See A. Harnack, "Porphyrius Gegen die Christen" in *Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Refrate* (Abh. Der Berliner Akad., 1916). His reconstruction came under intense criticism. See T. D. Barnes, "Porphyry, *Against the Christians*: Date and Attribution of Fragments" in *JThS*, n.s. 24 (1973), 337-55.

³⁹ See R. M. Grant, "Porphyry among the Early Christians" in *Romanitas and Christianitas* (Amsterdam and London, 1973), 181-87.

By emphasizing the widespread agreement of all the emperors, law givers, and philosophers, the fragment underlines what could be called the pagan equivalent to the Christian notion of universally accepted tradition or *magisterium* as what by everybody, everywhere, and always was believed as true (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*). The force of the argument lies not so much in the fact that Christians abandoned belief in traditional divinities.

Porphyry certainly knew that many philosophers expressed their doubts about Olympian gods. What is truly devastating in the context of the persecution is that Christians go against the *opinio communis* of all the “emperors, lawgivers, and philosophers.” Speaking in one voice, emperors, lawgivers, and philosophers attest to the universality and antiquity of the traditional religion.

In a direct quotation from the pagan philosopher, Eusebius records that Porphyry considered Christianity “contrary to the law.”⁴⁰ Such a statement must have deeply offended Eusebius. What made counterargument difficult was the fact that Porphyry had even considered toleration of Christianity, but then rejected that option.⁴¹ Porphyry believed that “many paths lead to heaven.”⁴² He was also willing to consider the Christian claim and showed considerable respect for Jesus (not, however, for the apostles, who were unworthy characters). In the end, Porphyry rejected the idea of tolerance toward Christians; because of their

⁴⁰ In *HE* 6.19.7 the distinction is made between ‘laws of the state’ and ‘barbarian recklessness’ (οι νόμοι πολιτείας – το βαρβάρων τόλμημα).

⁴¹ Elizabeth Depalma Digeser, “Lactantius, Porphyry, and the Debate over Religions Toleration” in *Journal of Roman Studies*, 88 (1998), 143.

⁴² Later in the fourth century Symmachus reiterated Porphyry’s claim that ‘many paths lead to truth.’ See Digeser, *Lactantius*, 142.

intolerance toward traditional religions, Christians cannot be loyal citizens, cannot serve the emperor, and thereby have put themselves outside the law.

There were basically two ways for the Christians to prove that they were not a seditious cult. The first was to find in the past some Roman official who showed respect for Christianity. If none could be found, some other Christ-loving ruler could serve the purpose. The second path was to link Christianity with a traditional cult respected by the Romans, namely Judaism. The first seemed to be a dead end, for in spite of considerable search Christians were not able to find much evidence. The strategy had been tested first in the *Acts of the Apostles*, but apparently the authorities were not convinced. Paul was executed even though the Acts present him as a Roman citizen.⁴³ Moreover, Pilate's verdict was the cause of great disappointment among Christians, especially those who were immersed in Greco-Roman culture, people like Eusebius. Out of disappointment with this first reaction of the Roman government to Christianity, an entire tradition of legends developed around Pilate.⁴⁴ Eusebius used part of that tradition in the second book of *Ecclesiastical History*. He quotes from the so-called correspondence of Tiberius and Pilate, as well as from the various fragments collected by Tertullian.⁴⁵ The correspondence alleges that Tiberius actually tried to overturn Pilate's decision but failed because of misunderstanding in the

⁴³ On the question of whether or not Paul was a Roman citizen and why the author of the *Acts of the Apostles* presents him as such see Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1982), 315-323.

⁴⁴ The first to mention the apocryphal tradition about Pilate, as early as the second century, was Justin in *Apology* 1.35, 48.

⁴⁵ In *HE* 2.2.3 Eusebius claims that Tiberius referred Pilate's report to the Senate. The body rejected the report, but Tiberius continued to have high opinion of Jesus in spite of the rejection.

Senate.⁴⁶ In addition Eusebius does not fail to mention other instances of high Roman officials favoring Christianity: the letter of bishop Dionysios in favor of the emperor Gallienus (253-268),⁴⁷ the alleged Christian sympathies of the emperor Philip the Arab (244-249),⁴⁸ and the interest of Mamea, the empress-mother of Alexander Severus, in the teachings of Origen.⁴⁹ All of these are important and helpful for the apologetic cause, but they say nothing about a favorable Roman attitude toward Jesus. The only story that mentions Jesus personally (outside the gospels) is the Abgar legend. Is it surprising, therefore, that Eusebius does not fail to mention that Abgar was a “friend” of the Romans?⁵⁰ In the absence of available Romans, any Christ-loving ruler who showed faith in Jesus, especially one friendly to Rome, would be of considerable help to the cause of Christian apologetics.

The second path implied the claim that Christianity was the true Judaism, the return to the “original” form of that religion, the religion of Abraham. Naturally, if Christianity represented a return to the pure religion of Abraham, Judaism must have drifted away at some point from that true religion. With the help of Josephus, Eusebius decided that it was Herod, the first non-Jew to occupy the throne of Judea, who was responsible for the straying away of Judaism.

⁴⁶ Tertullian is convinced that Pilate himself could be regarded as a Christian. See *Apologia* 5 and 21. Eusebius fails to report that.

⁴⁷ *HE* 7.23.1-4.

⁴⁸ *HE* 6.34.1.

⁴⁹ *HE* 6.21.3.

⁵⁰ *HE* 1.13.16.

When Eusebius looks at kings, the anointed of God, he sees an uninterrupted line from Moses, through David, to the last of Maccabees. Herod broke the line of legitimate Jewish kings, and the interruption occurred exactly when Jesus was born.⁵¹ From that point on the position of sacred king was vacant. During the course of *Ecclesiastical History* we see it gradually transferred to the Romans, with Constantine as the ultimate receptacle. According to Eusebius this interruption was not just a political coincidence, but also an event in the history of culture, rich with deeper theological significance. When the native kingship ended in Judea, the most important “apprentice” of the Logos had just left the “classroom” and needed to be replaced. Later on, in *Demonstratio Euangelica*, Eusebius will develop this idea further. The end of native dynasties not only in Judea but also in Egypt, Cappadocia, Macedonia, Bithynia, and Greece was a clear sign that something extraordinary was going on, paralleling the Roman conquest on the spiritual plane.⁵²

It was in the works of Origen and Eusebius that Josephus came to have “incalculable value as source material” for the Christian church, “a kind of fifth gospel.”⁵³ Josephus provided to Christians under pressure a valuable tool.

Josephus was an apologetic writer whose history (archaeology as he called it)

⁵¹ *HE* 1.6.1-2. Eusebius relies heavily on Josephus for the information about Herod and the Herodian dynasty. In 1.6.9 Eusebius quotes Josephus on how Herod was appointing high priesthood to obscure persons, thereby further aggravating the situation by interrupting both royal and priestly line. This kind of interruption is the best ‘proof’ of Messianic times. Eusebius quotes Gen 49:10 (LXX) as a proof text: “A ruler shall not fail from Judah nor a leader from his loins until he come for whom it is reserved.”

⁵² *Demonstratio Euangelica* 3.7.33-55.

⁵³ Heinz Schreckenberg, “The Works of Josephus and the Early Christian Church” in Louis Feldman and Gohei Hata, *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 317.

demonstrates the antiquity of his people. He was an independent witness of sacred history, and he also mentions Jesus in that context.⁵⁴ Romans considered their own history sacred in the sense that Rome is eternal and predestined to rule. They respected peoples who could prove the antiquity of their customs and disliked innovators. Josephus used the same format found, for example, in Dionysios of Halikarnassos's *Roman Antiquities* and presented the biblical story in that format. For Christians to have the *Antiquities of the Jews* on their side was an important realization.

Eusebius saw a connection between the “polyarchy” of national states gradually conquered by the Romans and polytheism.⁵⁵ The *Pax Romana* meant the end not only of nationalism and political pluralism, but also of polytheism, the worship of many gods. Of all the emperors mentioned in the *Ecclesiastical History*, by far the most important is Augustus, because he was the one who inaugurated the *Pax Romana* and thereby made physically possible the dissemination of the message of Jesus.⁵⁶ The establishment of the Roman Empire by Augustus ended the rule of various nation states and their rulers,

⁵⁴ Despite the scholarly debate over the extent of *Testimonium Flavianum*, it is probable that Josephus himself included some of the material about Jesus. The fact that among many Jewish historians such as Eupolemus, Demetrius, Nicholas of Damascus, and Justin of Tiberias, only Josephus is preserved, indicates that the main reason must have been his mentioning of Jesus. Incidentally many of the fragments from the historians listed above are preserved only by Eusebius, indicating that he had done a considerable research in this area. See Steven Bowman, “Josephus in Byzantium” in Feldman, *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, 362-3.

⁵⁵ Michael Hollerich, *Eusebius of Caesarea's Commentary on Isaiah: Christian Exegesis in the Time of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 190.

⁵⁶ The theme is already present in Origen and Eusebius must have received it from there. In *Against Celsus* Origen observed that Augustus' unification of the diverse kingdoms of the world under his sole rule enhance the fulfillment of the Lord's command to spread the good news to all the nations (Matt. 28:19). Origen, *Contra. Celsum*. 2.20. See the discussion in Hollerich, *Eusebius*, 190-1 and in Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (Leipzig: Jakob Hegner, 1935), 86.

including Judea. King Abgar of Edessa fits this pattern. Not only was he a good “apprentice” of the Logos who intuitively understood that the purpose of the Logos is to soften the mind of heathens, but with his sense of calling Abgar is drawn irresistibly to the incarnate Logos himself, just as his city is drawn to the Roman Empire, the place where God has first called the Gentiles.⁵⁷

The apologetic strategy adopted by Eusebius, which linked the emergence of the principate with the triumph of monotheism, had unpleasant consequences, especially in the days of Diocletian’s reforms. Lactantius, a western contemporary of Eusebius, openly advocated a return to the tradition of principate established by Augustus (*Divine Institutes* 1.3). In place of four emperors, each claiming divine descent, Lactantius sets up an example of Augustus, who allowed that certain vague “divine honors” be rendered, but not worship, especially not while the emperor was alive.⁵⁸ What must have been especially offensive was Christian description of the times of Augustus as the times of piety, when “God was worshiped.”

With the writing of apologetic literature, Christians were entering politics, and the state decided to respond to such an intrusion. From its inception the sect was threatened with sporadic local outbursts of persecution that became systematic during the middle of the third century when Decius, disappointed with the inadequate millennial celebration of the founding of Rome (247) under Philip the Arab, ordered all the citizens to sacrifice and present the authorities with a certificate. In 258 Christians were saved from the imperial furor only by the timely

⁵⁷ *HE* 1.2.23.

⁵⁸ Digeser, *The Making of the Christian Empire*, 44.

and humiliating capture of the emperor Valerian by the Persian king. Living in the Roman Empire was not easy for Christians, but the decision taken by Gallienus in 260 to recognize the corporate status of the church and make possible direct ownership of cemeteries, churches, and other property, was directly praised by Eusebius.⁵⁹ Scholars have called the period from 260 to 303 the “Little Peace of the Church.”⁶⁰ With Diocletian’s reversal of Gallienus’s decision, the Roman state finally made the decision on which course to take with regard to the Christians. With the same focused and unrelenting energy he devoted to the reform of the state, he undertook the task of uprooting Christianity like a “bad tooth” causing unrelenting pain that needed to be pulled out. The era of toleration was over.

Persecution, especially the one organized by Diocletian and the tetrarchs, is often portrayed as being only physically brutal; it was also intellectually challenging. It was a war of cultures fought among the intelligentsia. Indicative of the cultural conflict are the works of both Lactantius and Eusebius. The *Ecclesiastical History* also played an important role in the Christian apologetic strategy, because it defined group identity by providing a shared memory of the past.

Editions of the *Ecclesiastical History* and the Abgar Legend

⁵⁹ “It is beyond our ability to describe in a suitable manner the extent and nature of the glory and freedom with which the word of piety toward the God of the universe, proclaimed to the world through Christ, was honored among all men, both Greek and barbarians, before the persecution in our day.” *HE* 8.1.1.

⁶⁰ Drake, *Constantine*, 114.

In his introductory comments before the text of the legend, Eusebius gives a clear indication that he writes in response to “shameless authors” who spread rumors about Jesus.⁶¹ What kind of rumors does Eusebius have in mind, who was spreading them, and when? Two events could be the candidates that fit the expression “shameless authors of forged reports.” Diocletian requested from a certain “priest of philosophy,” a man living in the city of Byzantium at the time, to prepare a defense of the traditional religion that could be used for repressing Christianity on the intellectual level.⁶² The other event that could have caused Eusebius’s rage was the publication of the forged memoirs of Pilate, issued during the persecution by Maximin Daia (tetrarch 305-313).⁶³ These questions, relating to the apologetic response of Eusebius, have already been raised above. The purpose of this section will be to determine when the Abgar story was included in to the *Ecclesiastical History* and how the events and people described as “shameless authors of forged reports” can be related to the process of writing and editing of the *Ecclesiastical History*.

In order to establish a correlation between the “forged reports” that so infuriated Eusebius and his response to them it is necessary to review the writing of the *Ecclesiastical History* and its various editions and versions. Eusebius routinely edited and revised his works, updating them in light of current

⁶¹ In *HE* 1.11.9 he uses Josephus as an example of an honest historian who did not spread lies about Jesus and compares that to anonymous people “who have concocted forged reports” about him.

⁶² Henry Chadwick made a suggestion that “the priest of philosophy” was no other than Porphyry (*Marc.* 4). See Henry Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus*, Texts and Studies 5 (Cambridge, 1959), 66. The suggestion was seconded by: Wilken, *Christians*, 135.

⁶³ *HE* 9.5.1

circumstances. We know there were revisions in the final edition of *Ecclesiastical History*, all of which had to do with the defeat and the fall from grace of Constantine's last rival, Licinius, in 324.⁶⁴ What follows is a review of scholarly reconstructions of the redaction process and the compositional unity of the work, especially of Book One, which serves as an introduction to the whole work. Here one faces an additional obstacle, because most of the historical-critical work has been done on the final books, which deal with the events in the life of Constantine. Naturally, the scholarly interest gravitated toward the final books because of the importance of the events they describe, the end of the persecution and the civil wars between Constantine and his rival.

The question of how many editions of *Ecclesiastical History* there were and when were they published boils down to how well one can reconstruct the life of Eusebius and how accurately the events of his life can be related to his literary output. Because we know very little about Eusebius apart from the few things he tells us, it is hard to guess when work on the *Ecclesiastical History* began.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the manuscript tradition itself confirms that the *Ecclesiastical History* underwent several stages of redaction. Two main positions have crystallized regarding the number, character, and the date of various editions. On the one hand, T. D. Barnes, following upon the suggestions of H. J. Lawlor, argues that Eusebius began and finished the first edition either in the late third

⁶⁴ See Kirsopp Lake "Introduction" to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), xix-xxvii.

⁶⁵ Eusebius's disciple and successor at the see of Caesarea, Akakios, wrote his biography, but this work has been lost.

century or in the first years of the fourth century.⁶⁶ This first edition, consisting initially of books one to seven, was subsequently revised several times, culminating with the final edition around 325.⁶⁷ On the other hand, many historians still agree with the older hypothesis proposed by E. Schwartz that the first edition appeared in the wake of Constantine's conversion in 313 and consisted of books one to eight.⁶⁸ Schwartz and Barnes agree that there were four editions, agree for the most part with regard to their content, but disagree about the dating and the extent of the material of the material included in the so-called first and second editions of *Ecclesiastical History*. In recent years the scholarly consensus seems to have shifted in the direction pointed to by Lawlor and revived by Barnes.⁶⁹ Barnes strengthens the hand of scholars who argue for an earlier date of composition by incorporating some of the strong points of the opposing hypothesis suggested by Schwartz. Let us summarize his list of editions and their content:

FIRST EDITION (ca. 295). This consisted of books one to seven. These books were not substantially changed in further revisions; only the introductory Book One was slightly retouched to include reference to contemporary persecutions.

⁶⁶ H. J. Lawlor, *Eusebiana; essays on the ecclesiastical history of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912).

⁶⁷ Barnes, *Editions*, 198.

⁶⁸ See Kirsopp Lake "Introduction" to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), xix-xxvii.

⁶⁹ Quasten claims scholars now lean toward the earlier date of composition. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht: Spectrum Publishers, 1961-66), vol. 2, 315. Barnes has, in fact, just revitalized the old thesis of Laqueur who contradicted E. Schwartz. See R. Laqueur, *Eusebius als Historiker seiner Zeit* (Berlin and Leipzig: W. de Gruyter, 1929).

SECOND EDITION (ca. 313/4). Books one to seven were retouched and Books Eight and Nine added. Most of the material in the newly added books came from a different work of Eusebius, the *Martyrs of Palestine*, written in 311.

THIRD EDITION (ca. 315). Book Ten was added, ending with the quotation of imperial edicts in 10.5-7.

FOURTH EDITION (ca. 325). Book Ten was finished in its present form and the events were brought up to date, especially with regard to the civil war between Licinius and Constantine in 324.

In contrast, E. Schwartz argues that the first edition consisted of Books I-VIII and it was planned in 311 during the brief respite in persecution caused by the edict of toleration issued by Galerius. The second edition added Book IX in 315, because the book is about persecution, which did not cease with the edict of Galerius in 311 but continued until the final edict of toleration was issued in 313. The third edition added the Book X in 317. This edition roughly corresponds to Barnes' third edition of 315, but some inaccuracies in dating caused Schwartz to push the date of this edition to the year 317. The fourth edition appeared after the fall of Licinius in 324. Eusebius made minor changes to make the account consistent with the *Damnatio Memoriae* of Licinius. Barnes and Schwartz agree about this edition.⁷⁰

What is not under dispute is that the final edition of *Ecclesiastical History* was published c. 325, after the end of the civil war between Constantine and his last

⁷⁰ For more details see Eusebius, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, ed. E. Schwartz, GCS IX.1 (Leipzig, 1909).

rival Licinius in 324, but before the death of Crispus in 326. This much can be clearly deduced from the editorial work in the last books of the work.⁷¹ The argument for the edition of 325 is based on strong textual evidence, not on much more easily disputed internal evidence, and has found general agreement among scholars.⁷² In the Books 8-10 Eusebius introduces several small changes to reflect the defeat of Licinius, and they must have been finished after the victory of Constantine over Licinius in 324. For example, a reference to both Constantine and Licinius as champions of Christians (*HE* 10.1.1) has been removed in some manuscripts and replaced with a single mention of Constantine. As for the date *post quem* we see that some of the early translations delete references to Crispus, the emperor's firstborn son (*HE* 10.9.4), and his role in the war of 324, and refer to Constantine's sons in the plural. We know from the *Life of Constantine* that Eusebius avoids mentioning Crispus at all and often glosses over his very existence.⁷³ The extent of these changes is limited and includes only minor revisions of words and phrases. There is no indication that major portions of the text were either added or subtracted.

Now we must consider the possibility that in the final edition of 325 Eusebius added the Abgar legend. About this time, during the proceedings of the first ecumenical council at Nicaea, Eusebius finally met Constantine for the first time. During their meeting the emperor told him face-to-face the story of his vision at

⁷¹ Barnes, "Editions", 191-201.

⁷² For a much detailed arguments see A. Harnack, *Chronologie der altchristlichen Litteratur bis Eusebius* II (Leipzig 1904), 111ff; E. Schwartz, *Eusebius Werke* II.3 (GCS IX.3, 1909), xlvii ff; H. J. Lawlor and J. E. L. Oulton, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History* II (London 1928), 2 ff; R. Laqueur, *Eusebius als Historiker seiner Zeit* (Leipzig 1929).

⁷³ On the three sons of Constantine see VC 4.40.1; 4.51.1ff. Cameron, *Life of Constantine*, 328.

the Milvian Bridge and vouched for its accuracy. The account of Constantine's vision is preserved in the *Life of Constantine*, a work whose authenticity has been doubted but which is now attributed to the waning years of Eusebius.⁷⁴ The account of Constantine's vision is absent, however, from the *Ecclesiastical History*, where Constantine simply makes an appeal to the God of the Universe before the critical battle at the Milvian bridge. In addition, Lightfoot argued that the final edition of the *Ecclesiastical History* was finished before the convening of the Council of Nicea, basing his assumption on the names of certain bishops mentioned by Eusebius, but who died before the council was convened and whose dioceses were represented by newly elected bishops.⁷⁵ It is quite unlikely, therefore, that after the council Eusebius rushed back to Caesarea and added immediately the Abgar legend to the Book One in order to praise Constantine, yet did not include the story of his vision at the Milvian bridge that he had just heard from the emperor personally.⁷⁶

Now we shift our attention to the earlier editions of the *Ecclesiastical History* in order to investigate whether and when the Abgar legend was added during the editorial process. The reconstructions of the editorial process depend on the ability to detect seams in the composition. The earlier books are generally much more optimistic in tone than the later books. Books 8-10 of *Ecclesiastical History*,

⁷⁴ Cameron, *Life of Constantine*, 1.28-32.

⁷⁵ Lightfoot "Eusebius" in William Smith and Henry Wace eds., *Dictionary of Christian Biography* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 322. Lightfoot summarizes Schwartz's argument.

⁷⁶ General consensus has shifted toward a more genuinely Christian Constantine, as he is presented by *Vita Constantini*, and voices that would reject *Vita Constantini* outright are fading. Scholars now give this testimony much more credence. On the debate about the authenticity of the account and *Vita Constantini* see Cameron, *Life of Constantine*, 4-9.

which describe the persecution of Christians, are sharply different in tone from the books 1-7, but scholars genuinely disagree as to what this difference in tone means for dating and reconstructing the editorial process. The chief question is whether the original design included the persecution of Christians, which Eusebius witnessed and recorded.⁷⁷ If it did, it is more likely that Eusebius did not begin to write the *Ecclesiastical History* before the persecution ended. If, on the other hand, the original plan did not include the final books dealing with the persecution, the possibility of an early edition, suggested by Barnes, cannot be avoided. This dilemma has split scholarly opinion; some scholars believe that the first edition must have appeared before the persecution even began, while others have concluded that it was only after the persecution had ended that Eusebius sat down to integrate his writings on the church's history with his work on the *Martyrs of Palestine*. Either the first edition of *Ecclesiastical History* consisted of eight books planned in 311, during a brief respite when Galerius ceased the persecution, or it consisted of seven books, conceived before 303, that is, before the first edict of Diocletian, which started the persecution, and was added to and edited along the way.

The second hypothesis seems to us more plausible for the following reasons. First, it would give Eusebius more time to collect and work on the immense amount of material included in the *Ecclesiastical History*. Second, in the first seven books Eusebius duly recorded all the bishops of Rome and Antioch and made their succession an essential part of the chronological framework. In the

⁷⁷ Barnes, *Editions*, 191.

remaining part of *Ecclesiastical History*, however, he drops this kind of chronological frame and narrates the events as they were happening. Third, the character of Books 1-7 is so optimistic and well-disposed toward the Roman state that it must have been written in the period when there was no persecution of Christians. Since Eusebius displays many characteristics in common with early Christian and Jewish apologetic literature, it is better to place the first edition of the *Ecclesiastical History* in the earlier period. As T. D. Barnes, the main proponent of the early edition, says, Eusebius was a man of the third, not the fourth century.⁷⁸ Finally, the idea of a first edition in 315 assumes that Eusebius had been actively influenced by the edict of toleration issued by Galerius in 311. Because in *HE* 1.1.2 Eusebius mentions “martyrdoms of our time and the gracious and favoring help of our Savior,” Schwartz concluded that Eusebius was writing this passage and planning the writing of *Ecclesiastical History* during the respite in persecution announced by Galerius in 311.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, Maximin Daia continued the persecution until Licinius defeated him in 313 and Eusebius was forced to add books nine and ten. The phrase “gracious and favoring help of our Savior” indicates the existence of an edition conceived during the respite in the persecution, but it does not imply that it was the first edition. We believe that Barnes is right to call this the second edition.

The phrase “gracious and favoring help of our Savior,” noted by Schwartz, also indicates that Book One was retouched during the persecution. It has to be pointed out that we do not have firm external evidence that the first book was

⁷⁸ Barnes, *Eusebius and Constantine*, 56.

⁷⁹ The edict of Galerius of 311 is quoted in Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 34.

edited in the same way as books eight, nine, and ten. The early books of the *Ecclesiastical History* do not show the divergence in manuscript tradition found in the later books.⁸⁰ For that reason, any speculation about the editorial process and its timing must be based on internal evidence and could be placed under strong suspicion because of the subjective character of the reasoning.

Furthermore, Book One mentions no contemporary historical events, apart from the persecution, that could help us pinpoint the date of its composition. There is nothing about Constantine in it; the edict of toleration that finally ended the persecution is not even mentioned, although Eusebius quoted it in the later books.

Answering the question when the Abgar legend was included in the *Ecclesiastical History* is to some extent guesswork. It is more probable that the Abgar legend was already present in the first or the second edition, as in Barnes's reconstruction, but no conclusive evidence can be provided in this regard. What is more important for our purposes is that, regardless of the date of its inclusion in the *Ecclesiastical History*, the Abgar legend shows no literary dependence on the story of Constantine's conversion. Constantine, in other words, was neither source nor *raison d'être* for the Abgar legend. Further discussion will show that the main purpose of the legend was not to praise the emperor but to defend Christianity from charges of sedition.

How much can one conjecture about when and why the Abgar story was incorporated into the *Ecclesiastical History*? If our premise is correct and

⁸⁰ See Kirsopp Lake, "Introduction" to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), xxvii-xxx.

Eusebius included the Abgar legend for the purpose of apologetics, then external factors, such as publication of an anti-Christian tractate, might have prompted the inclusion. A great onslaught against Christians started with the issuing of edicts by Diocletian in 303, but the Roman authorities were not satisfied with administrative measures alone. Some works, such as Porphyry's *Against the Christians*, even if they were not originally intended as a part of the propaganda machine for persecution, were used for that purpose once the persecution started.⁸¹ Diocletian's suspicion of non-traditional religions and the beginning of the persecution is the *terminus ante quem* for the incorporation of the Abgar legend in *Ecclesiastical History*. One of the best candidates is an intense crisis provoked by the publication of the forged *Memoranda of Pilate*, issued by the court of the tetrarch Maximin.⁸² This event seriously disturbed Eusebius, who must have resented Maximin's actions very much, because no other persecutor is presented in a gloomier light and no other incited Eusebius to use the terms such as "the monster of impiety," "the hater of the good," and "the most bitter enemy of piety."⁸³

The fact that Eusebius refers to the forged *Memoranda of Pilate* only in books one and nine suggests that this material was added to book one at the same time when book nine was added to the whole work. If this is correct, the Abgar legend could also have entered *Ecclesiastical History* in this second edition, published, according to T. B. Barnes, in 313/314, because this is the first edition to contain

⁸¹ Kofsky, *Eusebius against Paganism*, 16.

⁸² *HE* 1.9.3, 1.11.9, and 9.5.1.

⁸³ In Greek the words are all in superlative: δυσσεβέστατος, μισόκαλος, and ευσεβείας πολεμιώτατος. *HE* 9.1.1.

the first part of the book nine. Angry editorial comments in *HE* 1.9.3 and 1.11.9 addressed against Maximin Daia indicate that book one was retouched to reflect Eusebius' disgust with the action of the tetrarch. In fact, just before the beginning of the Abgar legend Eusebius, commenting on the accuracy of the statements of Josephus about Jesus, says the following: "When a writer sprung from the Hebrews themselves handed on in his own writing these details concerning John the Baptist and our Savior, what alternative is there but to convict of shamelessness those who have concocted the reports about them?" Eusebius uses the same word here, "forged memoirs" (υπομνήματα πλασάμενοι), as in the passage of the Book Nine. The reports that Eusebius has in mind are the forged *Memoranda of Pilate* issued by Maximin Daia.⁸⁴ Is it a coincidence that immediately after this statement Eusebius moves on to the story about the apostle Thaddeus, the missionary to king Abgar and the city of Edessa? While open to various interpretations, the evidence could suggest that the Abgar legend was included in the *Ecclesiastical History* at some time during the Great Persecution, possibly on the occasion of the publishing of the forged *Memoranda of Pilate*.

The composition of Book One might indicate, however, that the inclusion of the Abgar legend happened earlier than the reign of Maximin Daia. One of the most important motifs of the book is the portrayal of the times of Augustus and Tiberius as the Golden Age of Roman society. An identical idea can be found in the work of Lactantius, the learned professor of rhetoric who resigned his post in

⁸⁴ *HE*, 9.5.1. Where Eusebius calls the text "the so called forged memoirs of Pilate and Our Savior" (πλασάμενη δήτα Πιλάτου και του σωτήρος ημών υπομνήματα).

Nicomedia after Diocletian initiated the persecution of Christians. Lactantius, much like Eusebius, defies the Dominate of Diocletian and praises the Principate as the Golden Age of Rome. He openly advocates a return to the limited government wisely instituted by Augustus.⁸⁵ Correspondingly, Eusebius does not fail to mention that the birth of the Savior happened twenty-eight years after Octavian defeated Anthony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium, finally bringing peace to a society torn apart by civic discord.⁸⁶ The times of Jesus were also the times when God-fearing emperors respected Christianity and accorded the Christians due process of law. In order to support his claim that Roman officials respected the founder of Christianity, Eusebius reports how Tiberius asked the Senate to vote on the recognition of the deification of Jesus.⁸⁷ Later on during the reign of Constantine, Eusebius will develop his unique political theology, according to which the emperor is the unique image of the Logos; but at this point in time, Lactantius and Eusebius still share the theory of seminal reason, which allows certain pagan emperors to carry out some elements of the general divine plan for the humanity.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Lactantius (*Inst.* 1.13.13) quotes Vergil (*Aeneid* 6.793-94) and identifies Augustus with the earthly king who will bring back the idyllic reign of Saturn. The recreation of the Golden Age of Saturn stands in sharp contrast to the Iron Age of Jupiter and Hercules, the two divinities that Diocletian and his co-emperor Maximian identified with. See Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 40-45.

⁸⁶ It is rarely noted that *Ecclesiastical History* is organized around the lives of Roman emperors. Book One covers the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, Book Two the reign of Tiberius, Book Three from Vespasian to Trajan, Book Four from Trajan to Marcus Aurelius, and so forth.

⁸⁷ *HE* 2.2.1-6. Quoting Tertullian as his source, Eusebius claims that after the resurrection Pilate finally recognized the divinity of Jesus and send the report about it to Tiberius. The emperor summoned the Senate to vote on the issue, but rejected it. Tiberius could not be swayed by the hesitant Senate and “kept his opinion and made no wicked plans against the teaching of Christ.”

⁸⁸ Eusebius *LC* 2.

The comparison between Eusebius and Lactantius indicates that they were responding to similar pressures and did so in a like manner. Both tended to idealize the early Principate as the Golden Age of Rome. A generation before Eusebius and Lactantius, Origen conducted the same debate with Celsus, whose main accusation against Christianity was that it undermined the unity of the empire. The Christian response did not change: Christ was born only after Augustus united all the nations of the world under his aegis.⁸⁹ When the persecution began in 303, the Roman emperor decided for the first time to act on the basis of the principle previously present only in the polemics among intellectuals: Christianity was guilty of undermining the unity of the empire, embodied in the figure of the emperor. They are causing sedition and schism in the well-ordained system of ethnic and natural religions of the empire.

We know that Lactantius was appointed by Diocletian to be a professor of rhetoric at Nicomedia. He is generally thought to have converted to Christianity and lost his post when the persecution broke out in 303.⁹⁰ In response to the tractate of an “anonymous philosopher” and other intellectual attacks on Christianity, Lactantius began to write, constructing a new trajectory of Roman history that idealized the freedom and piety of the Principate and contrasted it with the restrictive atmosphere of the Dominate.⁹¹ One can detect a similar attitude in Eusebius, who also idealizes the times of Augustus and Tiberius in order to achieve his apologetic goals. Even if they did not influence each other,

⁸⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2.30.

⁹⁰ Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus*, 80.

⁹¹ Digeser identifies the “anonymous philosopher” with Porphyry. See Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 91-94.

both men were responding to organized attacks and both responded in a similar way. Unfortunately, the evidence does not permit us to draw a more precise conclusion regarding the inclusion of the Abgar legend into Book One of the *Ecclesiastical History*. Beyond the fact that both men found themselves in a similar situation and responded by rewriting the history of Rome in a comparable fashion, very little can be said as to whether or not the attacks of the “anonymous philosopher” prompted Eusebius to include the Abgar legend into *Ecclesiastical History*. The only thing that can be asserted with certainty is that sometime during the Great Persecution (303-313) the legendary king of Edessa found his way into the revised version of Roman imperial history as it was narrated by Eusebius.

Conclusion

How Eusebius obtained the copy of the Abgar legend is not entirely clear, but his library at Caesarea was probably the best place in the ancient world to look for such a document.⁹² Unless there is a dramatic discovery in the area of Syriac studies, we will probably never know more about the origins of the Abgar legend. What we know is that Eusebius had the text at his disposal and decided to include it in the first book of *Ecclesiastical History*. This was a momentous

⁹² Jerome refers to this library as “the library of Origen and Pamphilus” (*De vir. Ill.* 112). Origen provided its original stock, but its subsequent development owed much to the energies and interest of Pamphilus, man coming from an aristocratic family in Berytus and later ordained presbyter in Caesarea (d. 310). Eusebius inherited this library from Pamphilus, his benefactor and friend. See Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 155-57.

decision, because the legend was included in a book whose other historical sources are the gospels and the fragment of Jewish historian Josephus. The decision certainly elevated the historical standing of the legend; ever since that time the legend has played a role in Christian history as an uncertain but widely appreciated source of information about Jesus.⁹³

We believe that the pre-history of the Abgar legend, that is, what was happening with the legend before Eusebius, is beyond our reach.⁹⁴ The manner in which Eusebius put it to use in the *Ecclesiastical History* is, however, readily available. In the context of Eusebius's understanding of the history of religion, his explanations for the decline of paganism and the incarnation of the divine Logos during the reign of Caesar Augustus, the Abgar legend became one more proof that the pagan world was turning away from the "polyarchy" of religious beliefs and was moving toward the monarchy of the Christian God. Eusebius was well aware, both from the Gospels and from Josephus, that the time of Jesus was not only when Rome established its Empire but also when the Jewish state lost its independence. Relying on Josephus, Eusebius points to Herod, the first non-Jew to sit on the throne of David. The fact that Judea had also lost the legitimate line of high priesthood, when the last of the Maccabean high-priest-kings, Hyrcanus, was taken prisoners by the Parthians, had deep religious consequences.

Eusebius explains those changes as the work of "seminal reason" (λόγος

⁹³ The full overview of the reception history of the Abgar legend in the Middle Ages can be found in Ernst von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder; Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, Band 18, Neue Folge, 3. Bd. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1899).

⁹⁴ For a very suggestive hypothesis about the history of the Abgar legend before Eusebius, see Robert Drews, *In Search of the Shroud of Turin* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984).

σπερματικός) in history. The time was ripe for the call of the Gentiles. King Abgar of Edessa was the first to respond to the call of the “seminal reason,” the power that dwells in every individual and ultimately guides history through the actions of those individuals.

One of those who responded to the call of the “seminal reason” to the Gentiles was Constantine. As a contender in the battle for the imperial throne, he must have realized the political value of the philosophy of history suggested by Eusebius and other Christian apologists. The newly converted emperor made very good use of it.⁹⁵ What made things easier was the fact that this ideology of divinely sanctioned imperial absolutism was not something that the Christians invented, but had its roots deeply in the Hellenistic and the Roman world.⁹⁶ In short, King Abgar was not made in the image and likeness of Constantine, as Walter Bauer believed; it was rather the other way around. Constantine made a conscious effort to look like the pious king of Edessa. The whole story of “morphing” the Roman Emperor with the pious king Abgar reached its peak when the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (913-959) ordered his painters to portray him on the walls of the Saint Catherine monastery at Sinai as king Abgar.

⁹⁵ On how effective Constantine was in the matter of political propaganda see H. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

⁹⁶ See N. H. Baynes, ‘Eusebius and the Christian Empire’ in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London: Athlone Press, 1955), 168-72.

CHAPTER V

GENRE OF THE STORY – ROYAL PATRONAGE OF APOSTLES

Christian Political Fiction

In the previous chapter it was noted that stories featuring powerful government officials favoring Christianity or Judaism were not uncommon in apologetic circles. Christian and Jewish apologists appropriated the idea of seminal reason (λόγος σπέρματικός) and used it to defend the rationality of their religion. In the argument presented by the apologists, Christian and Jewish religious teaching became identified with the rational religion sought by the Stoics. With this borrowing came a distinguished kind of political philosophy that sought to define the role of the king in terms of natural law and rational order. The seeds of reason present in all humans, naturally and inevitably, led many a pagan to know the One God and consequently to patronize monotheism and its apostles. Eusebius adopted this apologetic strategy and applied it not only to political philosophy, but also to the philosophy of history.

Here we will pursue the common features of popular stories about religious figures and kings by placing them in the field of literary studies. The question raised in this chapter is: What kind of literature is the Abgar legend? All these stories, including the Abgar legend, should be seen not primarily as historical sources of very little value, but as popular literature, circulating for some time and

then written down. The purpose of the analysis is to show that the Abgar legend was not an isolated literary phenomenon but a part of a larger trend, where anonymous authors appropriated the genre of the court tale and adopted it for their own purpose and for the use of the community they were writing for.¹ The stories of royal patronage of missionaries begin to multiply in the later part of third century, when the process of appropriation seems to have started on a larger scale. Such stories existed throughout antiquity, and their roots go back into the time of Hellenistic monarchy,² but with the formal recognition of the corporate status of the church by Gallienus in 260 and the dramatic events of Constantine's conversion we can follow a real explosion of this literary genre.³

In this chapter we will look for similar stories, the stories that belong to the same literary kind or genre.⁴ At first we will look for comparable Christian stories; later we will concentrate on similar Jewish and Manichean stories of royal conversions. The overarching principle of selection will be their origin from the same general area, the Fertile Crescent, and the time period from the middle of the third century to the end of the fourth century. The chronological boundaries

¹ Appropriation seems to be a more fitting word than the more traditionally used 'borrowing' and 'influence', because there was no conscious effort on the part of one author toward the other. For the theoretical analysis of the term 'appropriation,' see Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 21.

² For example *The Letter of Aristeas* describes the patronage of Judaism by Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247 BC). Although the account was probably written in the first century BC, it still predates the Abgar legend by several hundred years. On the date of *The Letter of Aristeas*, see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. Eng. tr. By G. Vermes and others, pt. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 677-87.

³ An illustration of the chronological order of the stories analyzed in this chapter appears in the Figure 2.

⁴ Genre is a recognizable and established category of written works employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind of literature. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, 1990 ed., s.v. 'Genre.'

are the same adopted in our review of the history of the reception of the Abgar legend. The analysis will focus on the shared literary conventions in all the works that share the same subject matter.⁵

What kind of stories are we looking for? The Teaching of Addai is a story about an apostle's mission to the city of Edessa and his successful conversion of the local ruler. As a result of the conversion, the ruler decides to patronize the founding of the Christian church in Edessa. The key for generic classification is the double transformation in the moment of encounter between the king and the religious missionary. Because of the encounter, an exchange takes place; an ordinary king becomes a pious king and an anonymous missionary guest is transformed into a powerful holy man or woman. Therefore, we will be looking at early Christian fiction in general, more precisely at the genre of stories that have an apostolic or a missionary figure as the main protagonist, in particular, where an exchange of power takes place between the ruler and the missionary figure.⁶

Early Christian fiction began to develop in two main genera, acts of apostles and acts of martyrs. When the persecution of Christians had stopped and the first

⁵ The underlying methodology of this kind of research is the historical-geographical method developed by the Finnish school of folklore studies. According to the Finnish folklorists, whose method attracted most scholars in the first half of the 20th century including the form critics, the life history of each complex tale and ballad requires separate investigation. After exhaustively comparing the traits of all the assembled variants of a given tale type, the Finns (specifically Kaarle and Julius Krohn and Antti Aarne) believed they could establish its original form and approximate place and period of genesis. See the classic: Aarne Antti, *The Types of the Folktale*, translated and enlarged by Stith Thompson (Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1928). In most other aspect apart from geography, this research is influenced by the reception theory put forward by the Constance school. See Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). We also embrace most of the post-modern criticism of the search for the 'original form.' See M. Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁶ Fiction is here understood as a branch of literature that includes stories, novels, romances, as well as other kinds of narrative prose.

hagiographies like the Life of Anthony appeared, there came to be a gradual merging of these earlier literary kinds, acts of apostles and acts of martyrs, into a single kind of literature called hagiography or lives of saints (acts of saints). It is often very difficult to draw a firm dividing line between a saint and an apostle, because apostles, though usually martyrs, were also saints.⁷ Hagiography is a biography of a saint that includes his or her acts and, in the earlier cases, his or her martyrdom. Some of the stories considered in this chapter would fall under the rubric of hagiography, others could be strictly called apostolic acts, if by an apostle we mean somebody who was a disciple of Jesus. In any case, the central point is the shared subject matter (the royal patronage of a missionary) and shared literary conventions.

Before we consider other stories about the royal patronage of an apostle, a question should be asked: What if the story is just a narrative about a specific haphazard local event and does not belong to any other wider generic type? It is true that many of early Christian apocrypha were popular mostly in local circles where the story had its origins. In fact, M. R. James calls the Acts of Addai “a strictly local legend.”⁸ In many ways this is accurate. It is not hard to detect in the story a large measure of local patriotism and a powerful drive for affirmation and legitimization of local political and ecclesiastical institutions. W. Bauer made this perfectly clear by arguing that the legend was “invented” to justify the

⁷ For an excellent introduction on how to approach the body of texts devoted to a single apostolic or saintly figure see François Bovon, Ann Graham Brock, and Christopher R. Matthews, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1-39.

⁸ M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 476-478.

establishment of the orthodox “faction” among the Christians in Edessa.⁹ We shall argue, by contrast, that the story was a part of a regional, if not international, “copy-cat” movement. Dates and the sheer number of the stories gathered and analyzed in this chapter give the indication how popular these stories were in the East, especially from the middle of the third to the end of the fourth century.

We have been able to find eight similar stories about royal patronage of missionaries. Five of these stories are Christian, one Manichean, and two Jewish. Starting with the *Acts of Thomas* in the first half of the third century, the stories about a missionary converting a local ruler multiplied with remarkable fecundity.¹⁰

- A. The apostle Thomas is depicted as a successful missionary to the court of Gondophares, an Indo-Parthian king of the first century. The story is a part of the *Acts of Thomas*. It was written before the middle of the third century.¹¹
- B. A story about the conversion of the Armenian royal family by Gregory the Illuminator is preserved by Agathangelos, an early Armenian historian. The writer asserts that he was a contemporary of Gregory and wrote his life at the command of the king Tiridates. The conversion of Tiridates III, the Armenian

⁹ W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Jan N. Bremmer thinks that the anonymity of the author may have been responsible for a ‘surprising fluidity’ in variants of the texts of apostolic acts. New episodes were added or inappropriate ones omitted. The martyrdom was often separated so that it eventually became a kind of literature of its own. See Jan N. Bremmer, ‘The Novel and the Apocryphal Acts: Place Time, and Readership’ in *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel, Volume IX* (Groningen: Egbert Foster, 1998), 157-178.

¹¹ See the introduction by H. J. W. Drijvers in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha, Volume Two: Writings Relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 332-9.

- king from c. 287 to 330, is traditionally dated to around 301.¹² The story itself, regardless of its date, does not seem to be induced by the conversion of Constantine.¹³
- C. Moses of Chorene, another Armenian historian from the fifth century, preserved a very interesting version of the Abgar legend. According to the *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* of Bar Hebraeus (1226-86), a Syrian bishop and polymath, Moses used as his source for the Abgar legend a *History of Armenia* written by Bardesanes, a Syrian Gnostic from Edessa who lived between c. 157-222.¹⁴ If Moses of Chorene had in front of him such an early source as Bardesanes, this version of the Abgar legend would actually predate Eusebius by about a century. This is, however, unlikely, because the account seems to have been influenced by the conversion of Constantine.
- D. There is a story about Nino, a nun who converted the king Mirian and the rest of the ruling family of Iberia or Georgia. It is preserved by the ecclesiastical historian Socrates (1.20) and by Rufinus in the additions to his Latin

¹² The early date is advocated by M. L. Chaumont, *Recherches sur l'histoire d'Arménie de l'avènement des Sassanides à la conversion du royaume* (Paris, 1969), 155-63. P. Ananian, 'La data e le circostanze della consacrazione di S. Gregorio Illuminatore', *Le Muséon*, 74 (1961), 43-73, 317-60 argues convincingly for the later date c. 314. The metropolitan of Caesarea in Cappadocia consecrated Gregory as a bishop in 314. Gregory's son, Aristakes, who succeeded him, attended the Council of Nicaea.

¹³ Even if the date around 302 is considered too early, one has to bear in mind that Constantine had no influence over the Armenian royal family. He had no influence on the East before 324, until defeated Licinius, but after that date he presents the war against Licinius as a Christian crusade and used it to his full political advantage. See T. D. Barnes, 'The Constantinian Reformation' *The Crake Lectures 1984* (Sackville: N. B., 1986), 39-57.

¹⁴ Bar Hebraeus, *Chron. Eccles.*, 1.47. See also William Wright, *A Short History of Syriac Literature* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1966), 29.

translation of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius (1.10).¹⁵ The story can be dated to the reign of Constantine, because he is explicitly mentioned in the text.

- E. The story of the conversion of the king Ezana of Axum in Ethiopia is preserved by Rufinus, with parallels in Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret.¹⁶ While the events in the Axum story take place far away from Mesopotamia, the main character himself, Frumentius, later called the apostle of Ethiopia, comes from Tyre in Lebanon. The story can be dated to the episcopacy of Athanasius (328-373), because he is mentioned in the text as the bishop who ordained Frumentius to the newly found bishopric of Axum.

All of the above-mentioned stories are Christian stories. Christianity, however, was not the only religion in the area with enduring and comprehensive missionary ambitions. Manicheism was a missionary religion *par excellence*:

- F. The story about the king Shapur's patronage of Mani originates from the second half of the third century, but we will consider it under the next heading along with other non-Christian royal conversion or patronage stories.
- G. The story of Emperor Vespasian's patronage of Yohanan ben Zakkai, the man who gained favor of the emperor during the siege of Jerusalem and was awarded the leadership of the rabbinic academy at Yavneh, cannot be precisely dated, but its importance is recognized by the editors of rabbinical

¹⁵ The names Nino and Mirian do not appear in Rufinus or Socrates, but rather come from later hagiographical works. Nino might be just a Georgian word for nun. See David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of Georgian Saints* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1956), 19.

¹⁶ Rufinus, *HE* 1. 9-10; Socrates, *HE* 1. 19; Sozomen, *HE* 2, 24; Theodoret *HE* 1.22. The same story is also preserved in the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell Mahre*, written in Syriac. The chronicles seem to quote from Socrates.

traditions under the leadership of rabbi Judah the Prince around 200, who included it in the collection of Mishnah.¹⁷ Its presence in the rabbinic literature indicates that it was circulating orally in the period under our consideration.

H. A story is preserved in Josephus about the conversion to Judaism of the ruler of Adiabene, Izates.¹⁸ It takes place during the rule of the emperor Claudius. The account recorded by Josephus relies on an extensive but unknown outside source.¹⁹ Strictly speaking, as a story recorded by a first century author, this account lies outside the bounds of this inquiry. However, the fact that the story about Izates and his mother Helena, the pious rulers of the small Mesopotamian principality, has also been preserved in rabbinic literature indicates that it was in circulation in the third and fourth centuries.²⁰

Figure 2 on the following page represents a graphic illustration of when these stories first appeared and who were their protagonists. The figure gives the date of the first appearance of these stories only tentatively, because the emphasis is on the appropriation of the narrative.

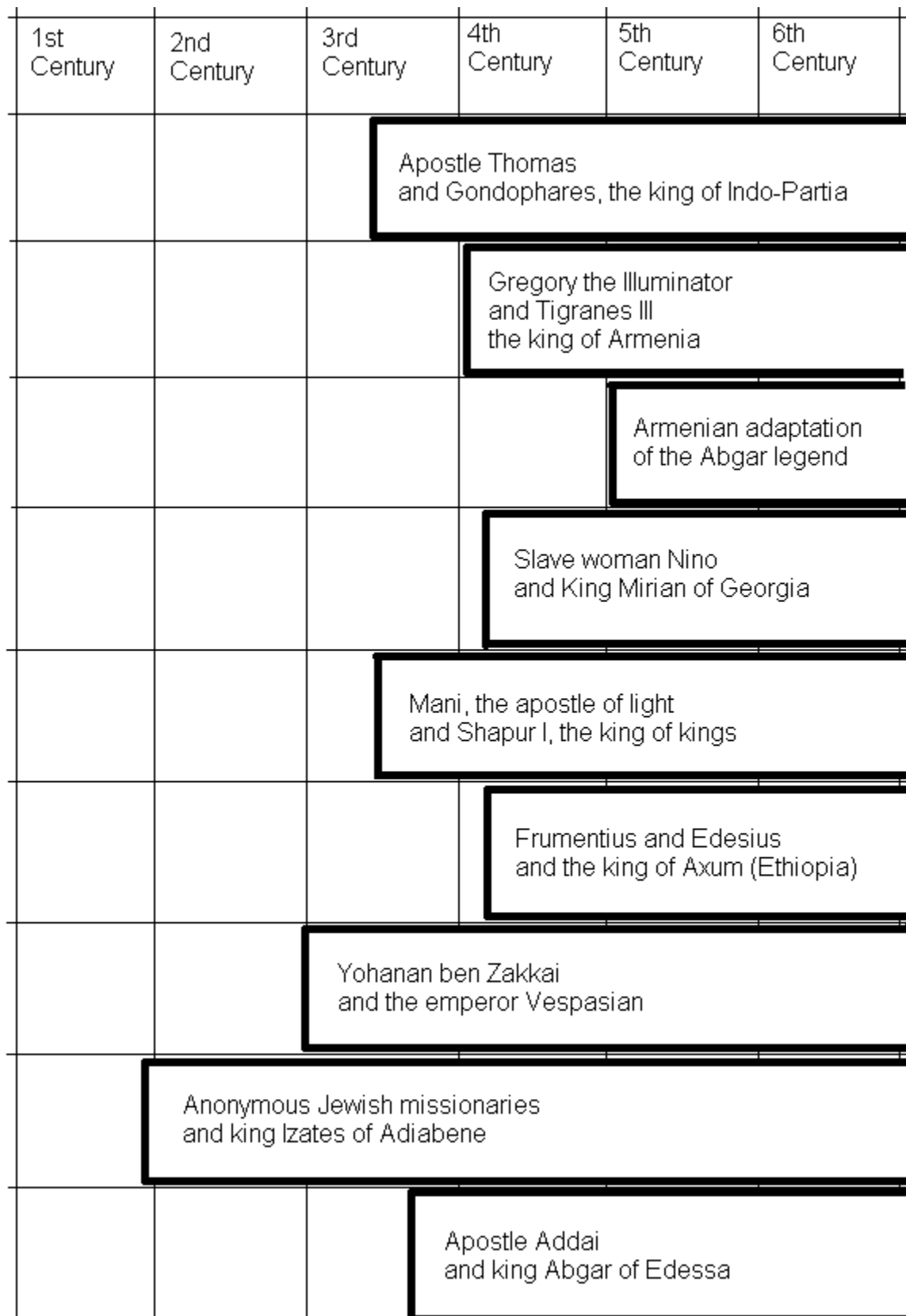
¹⁷ Jacob Neusner, *Development of a Legend* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 228.

¹⁸ Josephus, *AJ* 20.17-96.

¹⁹ Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene in Josephus and Rabbinic Sources" in Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata, *Josephus. Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 293.

²⁰ The story appears in several Midrashim from the Tannaitic period as well as in the *Bereshith Rabbah* 46:11, that comes from the fifth generation of the Palestinian amora. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene", 293-312.

Figure 2 - Royal Patronage Stories - Appearance and Circulation Graph



In the analysis that follows, the Christian stories will be evaluated first. Since most of these stories are recorded in obscure and barely accessible editions, in the following pages we will include a short précis of the each narrative and follow with a few comments on differences from and similarities with the Teaching of Addai. Before going further into the analysis, it should be noted that all these stories, without exception, are literary fiction. The evidence indicates that the Fertile Crescent converted to Christianity not from the top down, but rather from the bottom up.²¹ Christians were present in Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Iberia, and other areas long before the alleged conversions of the local royalty.²² We shall analyze historical and sociological circumstances in the following chapter, but at this point, when we are concentrated on the literary analysis, it should be enough to emphasize the fictional character our texts. The question why this literature contains such an amount of “historical glitz” will remain for the next chapter.²³

²¹ Generally speaking, the eastern parts of the Roman Empire were converted to Christianity from the bottom up. In contrast with the East the conversion of Western Europe occurred from the top down. On the differences in the process of Christianization between East and West in the fourth century see T. D. Barnes, ‘Religion an Society in the Reign of Theodosius’ in H. Meynell ed., *Essays on Augustine* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), 157-175.

²² The Early Middle Ages preserve numerous conversion narratives of European peoples, which probably constitute a literary genre. One needs only to be reminded of the cases of King Clovis of France, King Olaf of Norway, Queen Margaret of Scotland, King Ethelbert of Kent, the forced conversion of the Saxon chief Widukind by Charlemagne, Prince Vladimir in Kievan Russia and King Boris in Bulgaria. See Wil van den Berken, *Holy Russia and Christian Europe* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 78-118.

²³ There were many attempts in antiquity to ‘correct’ the historical record. Motives often vary. Solon and Pisistratus allegedly interpolated the Homeric text in Athens’ interest (Strabo 9.1.10). Galen came across a book passed off under his own name (*Scr. Min.* 2). The seven books on pontifical law by King Numa Pompilius found in 187 B. C. must have been a forgery. It is not clear how many of the 130 comedies attributed to Plautus were composed with the precise purpose of cheating the public. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “Forgery.”

Indo-Parthia

The account of the mission of the apostle Thomas to the Indo-Parthian ruler Gondophares is preserved in the Acts of Thomas.²⁴ This text is usually dated to the beginnings of the third century and is often assigned to Edessa.²⁵ The romance we now have under the title “The Acts of Thomas” is a collection of several stories, episodes, hymns, liturgical elements, etc. It is a much longer and a more elaborate narrative than the legend of Abgar and its author uses, in addition to several purely Christian themes, the full panoply of motifs taken from Hellenistic novels. There are two “royal conversions”; in the first, Thomas baptizes the king Gondophares and his brother; in the second, Siphor, a disciple of Thomas, converts the king Misdaï on the grave of the apostle. The whole work is divided into thirteen smaller acts, or episodes. The conversion of Gondophares takes place in the first half, the conversion of Misdaï towards the end of the text.

There are some striking similarities between the narrative depicting Thomas and Gondophares and the legend of Abgar. The Acts begin with the distribution of mission territories among the apostles. Thomas is reluctant to undertake his lot, India, thus staying completely within his character as depicted in the Gospel of John. At the same time, a merchant sent by the king Gondophares, whose

²⁴ Eusebius mentions the mission of Thomas to Parthia (*HE* 3.1.1). He also mentions Bartholomew's mission to India (*HE* 5.10.3). To understand the geography, it is helpful to remember that Africa and India were commonly thought to be connected by a land bridge. India is often confused with Ethiopia. Eusebius probably had Ethiopia in mind when he speaks of Bartholomew and India. Cf. A. Dihle “Umstrittene Daten” *Untersuchungen zum Auftreten der Griechen am Roten Meer* (Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 32, (1965), 36-64.

²⁵ A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 23 and Gilles Quispel, *Makarius, Das Thomasevangelium und das Lied von der Perle* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 39.

name is Abbanes, arrives on the scene. He has orders to purchase a slave carpenter. Jesus personally sells Thomas to Abbanes and writes a deed of sale (one is immediately reminded of the letter of Jesus to Abgar). In this case a “deed of sale” written by Jesus serves as a letter of recommendation and establishes apostolic authority of Thomas. As the story continues, Thomas travels to India and is given the task of building a palace for the king. Thomas, however, distributes the king’s abundant supplies to the poor. The king, without realizing the nature of the apostle’s work, sends him to prison. In the meantime, the king’s brother dies. Once in heaven, the king’s brother sees what sort of palace Thomas has been constructing for his brother. He is given permission to return and tell Gondophares about the palace in heaven. Immediately, the two brothers seek conversion, and Thomas baptizes them. The baptism is followed by the Eucharist and a longer sermon of Thomas.

The legend of Abgar lacks most of the novelistic repertoire used so abundantly by the author of the Acts of Thomas. In particular, the role of women is less prominent. This change in style indicates that the intended audience might have changed too. In the previous subheading, we discussed the issue of the intended audience of the major apostolic acts. In contrast to the Acts of Addai, the Acts of Thomas, along with other major apostolic acts, is largely addressing an audience of upper-class women. If the people converted in the acts represent the intended audience of the texts, both men and women of the upper class are converted in the Acts of Thomas. It is much more difficult to convert husbands than the wives, a situation common to all major five apostolic acts where men

present the main obstacle to the conversion of women. In the Acts of Addai, by contrast, the conversion of upper-class men happens without much difficulty. In fact, the Acts of Addai displays many characteristics of the chronicle, a genre more “suitable” for the male audience than the novel.

Armenia

The conversion of the Armenian royal family to Christianity even before the conversion of Constantine is a historical fact often proudly asserted in the Armenian Church.²⁶ The story itself is preserved by the Armenian historian of the fourth century, Agathangelos. He was allegedly a secretary to the king Tiridates III, who converted to Christianity under the sway of Gregory the Illuminator.²⁷ Agathangelos’s account makes the Armenian Church dependent on Cappadocia, but it also betrays the Syrian origins of Armenian Christianity. The account begins with the murder of Xosrov, king of the Armenians, by a Parthian noble, Anak. The assassination was planned at the instigation of the Sassanid king Ardashir.²⁸ Anak is killed and his two young sons are taken away, one to Persia, the other, whose name was Gregory, to Caesarea in Cappadocia. The Persians

²⁶ For example: Sirapie Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), 29-30.

²⁷ The author of the text presents himself as the secretary to the king Tiridates. The critical edition of History of Armenia by Agathangelos can be found in Guy Lafontaine, *La Version Grecque Ancienne du Livre Arménien d’Agathange* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, Institut Orientaliste, 1973). English translation in: R. W. Thomson trans., *Agathangelos: History of the Armenians* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976). We have also found useful the French translation in Victor Langlois, *Collection des historiens anciens et modernes de l’Arménie* (Paris: F. Didot frères, 1880).

²⁸ Ardashir died in 241 and was succeeded by Shapur I (242-272).

invade Armenia and Tiridates, the murdered king's son, takes refuge in Rome. Tiridates gains the attention of the emperor Diocletian, who restores him to the throne of Armenia. In the meantime, in Cappadocia Gregory is being brought up as a Christian. As soon as Tiridates has regained the throne of Armenia, Gregory joins the court, without revealing his identity. Following a familiar pattern in all court tales, Gregory is asked to sacrifice to pagan gods still worshiped in the realm. When Gregory refuses, he is thrown into the pit from which no one has ever emerged alive. As Gregory is left in the pit, where he will stay for fifteen years, the story turns to beautiful Rhipsime, a nun who took refuge to Armenia. One would think that Rhipsime and her companions were fleeing the impending persecutions of Diocletian, but the story is much more flamboyant. Diocletian personally pursued Rhipsime and wanted to force her into marriage. Unfortunately, the beautiful nun cannot find protection even in Armenia. Tiridates, once he sees Rhipsime, also becomes a "victim" of her beauty. After the rejection, Tiridates gives orders that Rhipsime and her companions be slaughtered. As punishment for this wickedness, Tiridates is turned into a wild boar and the whole country is tormented by demons. Suddenly the king's sister has a vision, in which she is informed that only Gregory can save the king and the country from the anguish. At this point, Gregory is brought back from the pit, still alive after fifteen years. Once back in the court, Gregory orders that the bodies of the martyrs be buried properly. He also orders the building of three churches and the king and the country are saved. Gregory instructs Tiridates and the court in the Christian teachings. Once the king is convinced of the truth of

Christianity, he proceeds to destroy all the pagan temples in the land. In the meantime, Gregory travels to Caesarea in Cappadocia to be ordained a bishop. On his return to Armenia, Gregory, now properly ordained, baptizes Tiridates, the court, the nobles, and all of the Armenian people.

The story of Gregory's mission to Armenia and the story of Addai's mission to Edessa are obviously so similar that one is justified to call the one the Acts of Addai and the other the Acts of Gregory. They belong to the same genre of historical fiction, the acts of an apostle or a saint, that has an apostle (or a missionary) as the main protagonist.

At the same time, the Acts of Gregory adds to the generic repertoire of apostolic acts a considerable number of elements common from folktales. The story has a hero, Gregory, and a villain, Tiridates, who is, nevertheless, redeemed at the end. The hero leaves home in the search for "a magical agent." In the case of Gregory, the magical agent common in folktales is replaced with his conversion to Christianity in Cappadocia. The Christian God will make all the future miracle of the hero possible. As in many folktales, the hero returns home unrecognized and is immediately pursued by the villain, in this case Tiridates. Once the hero is recognized, the confrontation between the hero and the villain can begin. Not everything in the Acts of Gregory, however, fits with the folktale pattern. In a fairytale the villain would have been killed and the hero would marry a beautiful princess. Tiridates, however, is punished and after his repentance he is restored back to power. His wickedness comes from his adherence to traditional Armenian gods. When this obstacle is removed, the story proceeds to

give the reader details about the establishment of the new religion. It explains how Christianity was established and who was the first bishop ordained. It becomes a foundation legend, an anticipated mix of fact and fiction.

The Armenians believe that theirs was the first state to embrace Christianity.²⁹ This fact, however, does not preclude the Armenian Church from claiming apostolic origins too.³⁰ The apostolic connection comes through Syria, not Cappadocia. Every catholicos-patriarch of the Armenians is considered to be sitting on the throne of the apostle Thaddeus, the apostle of Edessa. This brings us to the Armenian version of the Abgar legend recorded by Moses of Chorene, which betrays the Syrian origins of Armenian Christianity.³¹

Armenian Version of the Abgar Legend

Moses of Chorene records a much expanded and embellished version of the Abgar legend. He incorporated the account into his history of Armenia and thus moved the legend of Abgar in the direction of chronicle. Since Moses of Chorene is drawing heavily from Eusebius, both in Greek and in the Armenian translation, he cannot be considered an independent source of the Abgar legend.³² Although

²⁹ The date of the conversion of Tiridates is disputed. Some propose 294. See B. McDermot "The Conversion of Armenia in 294 A. D., *Revue des études arméniennes* 7 (1970), 218-259. Others argue for 314. See P. Ananian, "La date e le circostanze della consecrazione di S. Gregorio Illuminatore", *Le Muséon* 74 (1961), 43-73, 317-360.

³⁰ Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1996), 49-62.

³¹ G. Winkler, "The History of the Syriac Prebaptismal Anointing in the Light of the Earliest Armenian Sources", *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205, 317-24.

³² Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, translation and commentary Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 32-36.

the Teaching of Addai had been translated into Armenian long before Moses of Chorene (the Armenian version is called *Labubna*),³³ he performed a complete “Armenization” of the Abgar legend. The story that has its origins in Edessa becomes a thoroughly Armenian story. There is no better evidence for the “copy-cat” mimicry of the royal conversion theme than the revision of the Acts of Addai by Moses of Chorene. It is, therefore, worth going into some details of the revision. We will list just the most important alterations:

- i. Moses of Chorene makes Abgar an Armenian king. This is not an easy task because the dynasty was well known in the region and always linked to Edessa. To get around this difficulty, Moses of Chorene claims that Abgar’s father was Arsham, an Armenian king. Abgar’s nickname Ukkama (“black”) is changed, via the Armenian translation *Arjn*, to Arsham.³⁴
- ii. In order to explain how the Armenian capitol was moved from Edessa to Ashitishat in Taron, the site of the holiest Armenian shrine and the mother church of Armenia, Moses of Chorene invents the division of Abgar’s kingdom after his death. Ananoun (probably a corrupted form of Manu) his son continues to reign in Edessa.³⁵ Sanadrour, his sister’s son, reigns in Armenia.
- iii. The apostle Addai (in the Armenian version he is consistently called Thaddeus) leaves Edessa, after the conversion of Abgar and continues to travel

³³ In the *Teaching of Addai Labubna*, the scribe of the king, wrote “the things concerning the Apostle Addai from the beginning to the end, while Hanan, the faithful archivist of the king placed it among the records of the royal books where the statues and ordinances are placed.” TA 103.

³⁴ Moses Khorenats’i, *History of the Armenians*, translation and commentary by Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 34.

³⁵ Indeed Manu V has succeeded Abgar V after he died in A.D. 50. The list of Edessan kings is preserved by a Syriac world chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre dated to 775. See Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 B.C. – A.D. 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 558.

around Armenia. He also became a martyr, being put to death by the king Sanadroug, who had suddenly relapsed into paganism under the influence of the nobility. On the basis of this story, every catholicos-patriarch of the Armenian Church claims apostolic authority and is considered to be sitting on the throne of the apostle Thaddeus.³⁶

iv. Numerous Syrian notables mentioned in the *Teaching of Addai* have been turned into Armenian princes in order to ensure the apostolic foundation of the Armenian Church. The Jew Tobias, who first received Thaddeus in Edessa and in whose house the apostle resided, became the founder of the Bagratids family, a ruling family of Armenia hand-picked by the caliphs in Baghdad to lead the country early in the ninth century.³⁷

v. The changes that Moses of Chorene introduced to the relationship between Abgar and Herod constitute a group of their own. The most important is his creative “fabrication” of the war between Abgar and Herod, on the basis of a single sentence in Eusebius (*HE* 1.13.16). There, Abgar is quoted saying, “I have such belief in him (Jesus) as to have wished to take force and destroy the Jews who crucified him.” Moses claims that Herod’s nephew Joseph was killed by the Armenian army under Abgar. Indeed Josephus reports that Herod’s brother Joseph was killed in the mountains near Jericho (*Wars* 1.17.1), but the incident is in no way related to Abgar.

³⁶ Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1996), 49-62.

³⁷ Khorenats’i, *History of the Armenians*, 40.

The changes introduced by Moses of Chorene to the Abgar legend indicate how fluid were stories of royal conversion and how easily they can be molded to suit political goals. While Agathangelos links Armenian Christianity with Cappadocia, Moses emphasizes its Syro-Mesopotamian origins. It would not be fair to say, however, that Moses of Chorene wrote a chauvinistic panegyric of Armenian royalty. One has to start with the premise that Moses had serious reasons, motive, and purpose to let his imagination work so freely on the Abgar legend. In a country that was a bone of contention between two world empires, fabrication of the apostolic origins and, therefore, the independence of the national Church were not necessarily acts of a sycophant.

Georgia

The account of the conversion of Georgian royal family by the nun Nino is preserved in Rufinus's additions to his Latin translation of the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius (1.10). The work can be dated to the end of the fourth century. The church historian Socrates, who wrote early in the fifth century, also included the account in his History of the Church (1. 20). The tale was also known to Moses of Chorene, but, true to his usual strategy, he "fuses" it with the conversion of the Armenian royal family by Gregory the Illuminator, and Nino becomes one of Gregory's disciples. Without paying attention to later hagiographical versions of the narrative, we will focus on the text preserved by

Socrates and Rufinus, even though what is preserved there seems to be a précis of a longer narrative.³⁸

Rufinus claims to have had a very reliable source for the story of the conversion of the Iberian people to Christianity. He says that the story was related to him by a certain Bacurius, a royal Iberian (*rex*), who was also a Roman dignitary in Palestine (*comes domesticorum*).³⁹ He does not preserve the name of “a certain captive woman” who converted the Iberian royal family, nor does the name of the king appear in his account. Later hagiographical tradition calls the slave woman Nino and the king Mirian.⁴⁰ (*Captiva* could mean *serva Dei*, nun, just as Nino could be *nonna*.) It is not surprising that Rufinus became interested in the story about a missionary woman. One has to have in mind his close association with the wealthy and influential ascetic Melania, who must have been pleased to read about the women in this story.

The story itself could be rightly called the Acts of Nino, and it contains four episodes. In the first episode, “a certain woman” brings a sick child to “the captive woman.” It was a custom in Iberia that if a child falls ill, it was carried around, so that each individual household could offer some remedy for the illness. Following a pattern of fairytales, the remedy is found at the end of the

³⁸ For a later ‘Life of Saint Nino’ see David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, second revised edition. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 19-39.

³⁹ It remains uncertain whether this Bacurius ever ruled Iberia. Socrates uses the term βασιλίσκος instead of the usual βασιλεύς. Rufinus’ term *rex* does not imply an actual reign over Iberia. For more details about Bacurius see David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 246-8.

⁴⁰ The ‘Life of Saint Nino’ was written by an anonymous Georgian hagiographer and is dated to the 10-11th century. See David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, second revised edition (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 19-39. The king is called Mirian and usually identified with Meribanes III, who was a contemporary of Constantius 337-360 (Ammianus Marcellinus 21.6.8).

search and in least suspected place, in a hut of a slave woman.⁴¹ The second episode of the story contains what is in folklore studies known as the recognition of an anonymous hero. The report about the cured child has reached the queen, who was, by chance, afflicted by some grave bodily illness. The queen asks that the slave woman be brought to her, but out of modesty and concern for the befitting behavior, the slave woman would not allow herself to be seen in public. Consequently, the queen seeks and finds the captive woman and is restored to health.

In the third episode, the king is informed about the miracle cure, but for the time he pays no attention to it, in spite of the fact that his wife often brings up the topic in conversation. Suddenly, during a hunt, the king finds himself shrouded in darkness in the middle of the day.⁴² In a moment of despair, the troubled king remembers the god of the captive woman and prays for deliverance. He also makes a promise that, if delivered, he will abandon all other gods and will serve the god preached by the captive woman to his wife. Not surprisingly, as the vow is uttered, the light of day is restored and the king is saved.⁴³

Finally, the fourth episode begins with the king summoning his people and relating to them what has happened. "The men believed thanks to the king and the women thanks to the queen," says the text. Iberia is converted to Christianity.

⁴¹ At least three typical morphological element of the folktale can be detected in this episode. First, the hero, Nino, unrecognized arrives in another country; second, a difficult task is proposed to the hero; third, the task is resolved. See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 61-2.

⁴² One has to remember that in the Near East, as well as in many other cultures, the hunt was the most important venue for the king to show his virility. To fail in the hunt meant to be unfit for kingship. See P. O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter* (New York: Asia Society, 1978), 10-11.

⁴³ It seems that the name of the god of the captive woman serves as a magical agent in the folktale. See Propp, *Morphology*, 43-50.

The captive woman instructs the royal couple and the people how to build the church. The walls are quickly erected, but one of the columns cannot be raised to its place in spite of the repeated effort. Neither men nor oxen are able to move the column. Nevertheless, during the night, the captive woman passes the whole night in prayer and in the morning the miracle has occurred. The column levitates in the air, and as soon as the people are gathered the pillar slowly descends on its base. The conversion of Iberia is now sealed forever; the miraculously erected church will stay to remind all subsequent generations.

With this last miracle of the captive woman, the people of Georgia are symbolically joined in wedlock to the Christian church. We have previously mentioned several element of the folktale in this account. Every good fairytale ends up with the wedding; it is a necessary element that brings a tale to a close.⁴⁴ Here a symbolic, mystical, and spiritual wedding has occurred between the people and the new faith. Again we find the common element of all the analyzed stories, the ending is always about the foundation of a church.

The account closes with an event that may shed more light on the political purpose of the whole story. The ending wants to assure the readers that the conversion of Georgia was not known to Constantine and that his hand was not involved. On the urging of Nino, the captive woman, an embassy is sent to the Emperor Constantine. The embassy carries a petition requesting that priests be sent to complete the work of Christianization. When the Emperor has heard the word about the conversion of Iberia, continues the account, “he was far more

⁴⁴ Propp, *Morphology*, 63-65.

glad at this news than if he had annexed to the Roman Empire peoples and realms unknown.” The message delivered to Constantine is subtle, but clear. An important piece of frontier area has been finally locked, sealed, and isolated from the political currents on the other side of the border, Sassanid Persia. One has to remember that in about 262, Shapur I had a grandiose trilingual inscription cut in Naqsh-e-Rustam, in central Iran. The inscription is known as *Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, because it enumerates his successes and lists five new fire-cults he had established as the result of divine favor. Among those listed and associated with the fifth Zoroastrian fire cult, we find Amazaspus, the king of Iberia.⁴⁵

Ethiopia

The story of the patronage of Christianity by the Ethiopian royal family, unlike the others, does not come from Mesopotamia; but as another story that was not induced by the conversion of Constantine it should also be considered.⁴⁶ The account is preserved in Rufinus (parallels in Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret) who refers to the country as India Ulterior.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 239-40.

⁴⁶ The story is also preserved in the Axum Chronicle. This Ethiopian text has long been given ‘no independent value as a historical source’ (F. Thelamon, *Paiens et chrétiens au IV^e Siècle*, Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1981, 42-44). The Axum Chronicle now experience a considerable re-appreciation in value in the investigation of B. W. W. Dombrowski and F. A. Dombrowski, ‘Frumentius/Abba Salama: Zu den Nachrichten über die Anfänge des Christentums in Äthiopien’, *OrChr* 68 (1984), 114-69.

⁴⁷ Rufinus, *HE* 1.9-10; Socrates, *HE* 1.19; Sozomen, *HE* 2.24; Theodoret *HE* 1.22. In antiquity, present day Ethiopia was often confused with India. Cf. A. Dihle “Umstrittene Daten” *Untersuchungen zum Auftreten der Griechen am Roten Meer* (Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 32, (1965), 36-64.

It can be summarized as follows: Meropius, a certain philosopher from Tyre, decides to visit India Ulterior. He takes with him two boys, Frumentius and Edesius. The expedition arrives to the country by ship and settles for a while in a certain harbor. It happened that at that time the Indians (Ethiopians) became resentful of the Romans because some treaty had been violated. In an ensuing riot all in the expedition are killed except for the two boys, who are turned over as hostages to the royal family. The boys are well received at the court and very soon they assume positions in the administration. Suddenly the king dies and the government is left in the hands of his infant son. The queen begs the young men to take charge of the prince, his education, and other affairs of the kingdom. In the course of time Frumentius builds a house of prayer and begins instructing the Indians (Ethiopians) in the principles of Christianity. Once the king reaches maturity, Frumentius and Edesius are free to leave, even though both are urged to remain in the country. Edesius hastens back to Tyre to see his family, but Frumentius travels to Alexandria where he tells the whole story to the patriarch Athanasius. The patriarch ordains him as the first bishop of the Indians and he returns there with episcopal authority. Rufinus ends the story by saying that he has heard the story directly from Edesius who was also ordained to “sacred office” at Tyre.

Once again we notice that the story ends with the construction of a particular building, the house of prayer, and the founding of the Church in Axum. We believe that one is justified to call this story the Acts of Frumentius. In the Ethiopian Church, Frumentius is commonly called “the Apostle of the

Abyssinians.” The story follows the same pattern as all previous royal conversion stories; it also uses the same repertoire of the court tale. The hero leaves home early in the story and after the shipwreck is abducted by “villains.”⁴⁸ During his sojourn at the court, both the hero and the “villains” are transformed by the new religion. The final transformation of the story’s hero occurs when he is ordained bishop. In a typical folktale the hero would marry a princess and ascend the throne. Here, Frumentius is married to the church and ascends the episcopal throne of Axum.⁴⁹

Finally, there are numerous later hagiographical works covering the same events, but the report we have in Rufinus (and the parallels in Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret) is unique.⁵⁰ We can square this account with the independent report of one of the protagonists in the story. Athanasius mentions the events in Axum in *Apologia ad Constantium* 31, claiming that he actually made Frumentius bishop.⁵¹

What is one to make of the royal conversion stories analyzed in this section? Do they represent historical facts or are they pure fiction? All the collected stories, with the exception of the Acts of Thomas, come from the pen of

⁴⁸ Shipwreck is an unavoidable literary convention of many ancient novels.

⁴⁹ Propp, *Morphology*, 25-65.

⁵⁰ Françoise Thelamon, *Païens et Chrétiens au IV^e Siècle* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1981), 37-83.

⁵¹ The chronology of Rufinus does not square with that suggested by Constantius’ letter to the rulers of Axum (Athan. *Apologia ad Constantium* 31). Athanasius says that he ordained Frumentius bishop, but implies that this took place recently, under Constantius. Athanasius became bishop in 328, but the letter is from the year 356. Thelamon argues, quite credibly, that Rufinus has deliberately falsified the chronology in order to make it appear that the mission to Axum took place during the reign of Constantine (306-337) rather than the reign of Constantius (337-360). Françoise Thelamon, *Païens et Chrétiens au IV^e Siècle* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1981), 62. See also: Philip R. Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47, n. 20.

ecclesiastical historians. They preserved them for two reasons, first as historians who show respect for important documents or traditions, second as Christians who saw in these stories divine providence at work in history. It is often hard to determine which of the two goals was more important, but one might say without hesitation that they saw the events that occurred before, during, and after Constantine's reign as a new apostolic age. In the words of Françoise Thelamon, in the minds of many Christians *tempora Constantini* were identified with *tempora apostolica*.⁵² What seems to be an inevitable conclusion after looking at the collection of royal conversion stories is that the "second apostolic age" began before Constantine's ascension to the imperial throne and ended long after his death.

For a very long time the prevalent opinion among the scholars of late antiquity was that the church had been caught totally unprepared for its own legitimization and for an empire ruled by a Christian.⁵³ The stories that we have assembled present exactly the opposite picture. They suggest that the church actively sought political patronage at least since the middle of the third century. How are we to square that with historical reality? We know that in the third century the empire passed through a period of great internal and external crisis. Internally, the empire had to face an economic crisis; externally, invasions by the Germans

⁵² Thelamon, *Païens et Chrétiens*, 466.

⁵³ E. R. Goodenough, "The Political Philosophy of Hellenistic Kingship," *Yale Classical Studies* 1 (1928), 55-102. Kenneth M. Setton, *Christian Attitudes Towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 17. Hendrik Berkhof, *Kirche und Kaiser: Eine Untersuchung der Entstehung der byzantinischen und der theokratischen Staatsauffassung im vierten Jahrhundert* (Zürich: A. G. Zollikon, 1947), 15. Per Beskow, *Rex Gloriarum: The Kingship of Christ in the Early Church* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell, 1962), 11-32.

from the North and Sassanids from the East. The reforms of Diocletian and Constantine were intended to overcome the crisis.⁵⁴

In turbulent times, one is well advised to have friends in high places. If there are no friends in high places, a legend could help to find them. For example, Harold Drake argued that all the Christian rhetoric in favor of Constantine had the purpose of putting pressure on him. Panegyrics in his honor, such as the one delivered by Eusebius and presenting Constantine as a devout Christian, alienated him from the pagan majority.⁵⁵ In many ways, royal conversion stories are panegyrics in a thin disguise. Could it be the case that by proliferating and disseminating the stories of alleged local royal conversions, Christians, as well as other religious movements, were putting pressure on the ruling class?

In any case, before undertaking a more detailed study of the politics of conversion stories in the next chapter, we will focus on non-Christian conversions of high-level officials, looking at similar events on the other side of the border, the Sassanid side.

Non-Christian Royal Patronage of an Apostle

In the throne room of Persia three vacant seats were kept for the kings of Rome, China, and the Khazars (i.e. the Turks) should they come to pay homage

⁵⁴ Scholars often highlight the differences between Diocletian and Constantine in their policy towards Christianity. T. D. Barnes argues that, while the two emperors were on the opposite sides in their treatment of Christianity, their common goal was revitalization of the empire. Their means were different. T. D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁵⁵ Harold Drake, *In Praise of Constantine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

to the king of kings (Shahanshah). The Persian Empire stood between the Roman Mediterranean dominion and the Asiatic empires of India and China and therefore in the center of the world.⁵⁶ To what extent did the Persian political and cultural environment influence religious communities in the realm, in particular, the Manicheans? Did they produce literature similar to the Abgar legend?

Manicheism

Mani was aware of being at the crossroads of East and West. He thought it imperative that the Manichean mission not be directed only toward one country. While Jesus was the prophet of the West, Buddha the prophet of India, Zoroaster of the Persians, Mani, born in the land of Babylon in 216, would become the messenger of the true God for all humanity.⁵⁷ In fact, Mani's declaration of his mission to the whole world in the *Kephalaia* is worth quoting in full:

He who has his Church in the West, he and his Church have not reached the East: the choice of him who has chosen his Church in the East has not come to the West... But my hope, mine will go towards the West, and she will go also towards the East. And they shall hear the voice of her message in all languages and shall proclaim her in all cities. My Church is superior in this first point to previous churches, for these previous churches were chosen in particular countries and in particular cities. My Church, mine shall spread in all cities and my Gospel shall touch every country.⁵⁸

Mani's program for proselytizing the whole world seems to be fully in harmony with the Sassanid main objective, restoration and re-conquest of the old

⁵⁶ Samuel Lieu, *Manichaeism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 61.

⁵⁷ A paraphrase of Mani's words from the preface of the *Shapuragan*, a summary of Mani's teachings dedicated to Shapur I (242-272) his patron. See also Lieu, *ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁸ Mani, *Keph.* CLIV. English trans. J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1982), 282. See also Lieu, *Manichaeism*, 61.

Achaemenid world empire. To what extent did Mani's universal gospel go hand in hand with the resurgence of Persian nationalism in the third century, and, if it did, can we find traces of a legend similar to the Abgar legend?

First, Shapur I (242-272), the man most responsible for the resurgence of militant Persian nationalism and the man who revived the imperial ideal of the Achaemenid era, was a devout Zoroastrian. Although he granted Mani permission to teach in the realm, in all public functions he remains a Zoroastrian.⁵⁹ Second, there has been much speculation based on a very slim body of evidence about the relationship between Mani, the early Manicheans, and the emerging Sassanid monarchy. We cannot find anything among Manichean writings that would look similar to the Acts of Addai. In fact, aside from the hints in Manichean literature, the only "solid" evidence we have of cooperation between the Sassanid court and Manicheism comes from a letter of Diocletian issued in 297 to the proconsul of Africa. As Peter Brown has rightly pointed out, the fact that Diocletian considered Manicheism the Persian fifth column does not mean that Manicheism was in the active service of Persian state.⁶⁰ It simply indicates what the emperor believed about the sect.

Furthermore, the earlier understanding of Manicheism as a reform movement

⁵⁹ On his inscriptions, Shapur always presents himself as a devout Zoroastrian. Furthermore, recent research has shown that Zoroastrianism enjoyed some success in Armenia, Georgia, and Caucasian Albania, and that it was not a religion without missionary aspirations. See Lieu, *Manichaeism*, 58-59.

⁶⁰ Peter Brown, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire" in *Journal of Roman Studies* 59 (1969), 92-103. Diocletian issued an edict against Manichaeans either in 297 or in 302. See A. Adam, *Texte zum Manichäismus, Kleine Texte 175* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1954), 83. Also: J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1987), 267-8.

within “Persian” religion is now almost universally rejected.⁶¹ One can no longer assume, as Widengren declared, that “By propagating a syncretistic religion, Mani was able to offer the Sassanid King of Kings as religion well-suited to be acceptable both to his Iranian and Mesopotamian subjects.”⁶² Such views are now rejected.

While a story similar to the Acts of Addai in Manichean writings does not exist, it does not mean that Mani and his followers did not desire royal protection and patronage. The fact that Mani’s chief missionary to the West was called Adda must raise some suspicion about the relationship between the Acts of Addai and some Manichean story.⁶³ However, there is not enough evidence to indicate a direct borrowing from the hypothetical story of Shapur’s patronage of Mani.⁶⁴ The evidence allows only the possibility that such a story might have circulated in an oral form.

What is recorded is a short report in the tenth-century Arabic chronicle compiled by al-Nadim. The description of the encounter between Shapur and

⁶¹ In a succinct summary of history of scholarship on Manicheism Iain Gardner writes: “In the heyday of the ‘History of Religions’ as a discipline Manicheism was reinvented as a Persian religion. However, ever since the 1920s scholarly attention has been repeatedly forced to focus on Gnostic and Judaeo-Christian origins and traditions in Mani’s teaching.” Iain Gardner, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). For the classical expression of the view of Manichaeism as a Persian religion see Geo Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism* (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965).

⁶² Geo Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism* (Uppsala: Universitets Årsskrift, 1946), 179. If Shapur intended to use Manicheism as a form of propaganda this was never acknowledged. On his inscriptions, Shapur always presents himself as a devout Zoroastrian.

⁶³ Drijvers argues that *The Teaching of Addai* is an anti-Manichean document put together to counter the successes of Manichean missionaries in the area and to counter the cordial relationship between Mani and Shapur. See H. J. W. Drijvers, “Addai und Mani, Christentum und Manichäismus im dritten Jahrhundert in Syrien”, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 221 (1983), 171-185. See also the critique of Drijvers position in Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia*, 40-44.

⁶⁴ See St Ephraim’s *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, ed. and trans. C. W. Mitchell completed by A. R. Bevan and F. C. Burkitt, 2 vols. (London 1912-1921) II, 221-9.

Mani is short enough to be quoted in full. Al-Nadim says that it occurred on the day when the crown was placed on Shapur's head:

The Manichaeans say that when he [Mani] came into his [Shapur's] presence there were on his two shoulders what resembled two lamps of light. When he [Shapur] beheld him, he exalted him and he was magnified in his eyes. He had originally expected to assault and kill him, but when he encountered him he felt in awe of him and well disposed towards him. Then he asked him why he had come and promised that he should return to an audience with him. So Mani asked for a number of requirements, among which there were that he [Shapur] should show favor to his [Mani's] companions in the provinces and the rest of the kingdom, and that they should have the right to travel wherever they might desire throughout the land. Shapur granted him all that he requested, so that Mani carried his propaganda to India, China, and the peoples of Khurasan, appointing a disciple of his for each region.⁶⁵

The events described by Al-Nadim do not contradict the picture we get from the occasional mentioning of Shapur in Manichean sources. Mani never converted Shapur, nor had Shapur ever been Mani's patron. It is surprising how sober is the picture presented by al-Nadim, although it comes from a document centuries after the event.

Mani operated in the Sassanid Empire. He preached near the heart of traditional Persian society and acted on the fringes of the Sassanid royal family.⁶⁶ He was obviously given permission to do so. It is also true, however, that Mani was executed on the charge of having provoked apostasies from Zoroastrianism.⁶⁷ In sum, even if the legend about Mani's conversion of Shapur was in circulation, which is not unthinkable, it must have died out very soon after

⁶⁵ Bayard Dodge ed. and trans., *The Fihrist of al Nadim* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970), vol. 2, 775.

⁶⁶ Brown, "Diffusion of Manichaeism", 94.

⁶⁷ C. Schmidt and J. J. Polotsky, *Ein Mani-Fund in Ägypten: Originalschriften des Mani und seiner Schüler* (Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philol.-Hist. Klasse, 1933), 27. See also Brown, "Diffusion of Manichaeism", 94.

its inception. The reason must have been the consistent failure of Manicheism to win basic protection for its mission wherever the message of the apostle of light might spread. The main purpose of the stories of royal conversion was precisely to win the approval of local political authorities for a certain religious group. Once permission was denied and the group had to face persecution, there was no point in maintaining the legend any longer.⁶⁸ It had failed to perform its function.

Vespasian and Yohanan Ben Zakkai

Having examined Manicheism and its stories, we turn now to Judaism. There is a broad consensus in scholarship that Judaism as a religion and the Jews as an ethnic group played a very important role in the land between Roman Palestine and the strong Jewish community in and around Babylon.⁶⁹ On both sides of the border the political establishment was well aware of the power and the influence of the Jews in the area.⁷⁰ As a consequence, the Jews, in both Roman and Persian territory, were determined not to repeat mistakes that led to two bloody wars and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Early rabbinic traditions reflect cultural influences from both sides of the Roman-Persian border, but also cautiously preach restraint in political matters. Yet, stories of political

⁶⁸ Social and historical aspects of the legends, namely the question 'to whom the story would have been useful, will be addressed in the following chapter.

⁶⁹ On the influence of the Jews and Judaism in Syria and Mesopotamia in late antiquity see Jacob Neusner, *Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism in Talmudic Babylonia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986).

⁷⁰ For instance, the legate of Syria, P. Petronius, regarded it as hazardous in A.D. 40 to provoke the Jews to enmity vis-à-vis Rome. Philo, *Legatio* 31 (216-17).

patronage and conversion are not absent from early rabbinic Judaism; the story of Yohanan ben Zakkai's encounter with the emperor Vespasian stands out immediately.

The story is preserved in two main accounts, the one in *Avot de Rabbi Natan* (ARN) and the other in the tractate *Gittin* of the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Git.*), but there are no significant differences when one looks at the précis of the narrative. Jacob Neusner subjected all the material attributed to Rabbi Yohanan to a close form and redaction critical scrutiny.⁷¹ Out of the material attributed to Yohanan, which includes legal sayings, biographical stories, historical narratives, and scriptural exegesis, my focus is only on the Escape Legend. Neusner was not able to date the story precisely, but he offered some time limits. None of the material, including especially the Escape Legend, predates the major redaction of the rabbinic material undertaken by Rabbi Judah the Prince around A. D. 200.⁷² None can be traced back to Tannaitic times. As far as *terminus post quem* is concerned, Neusner suggest the period of Julian's efforts to rebuild the Temple (361-363). He hesitates to give a precise date as well as a concrete occasion for the "invention" of the legend and says:

We may only imagine that at some point in Amoraic times, it became important to tell escape-stories. I can propose no conjecture on when, where, and why it became important to make up such a story, or to whom it would have been useful. Perhaps opposition to Julian's attempt to rebuild the

⁷¹ Jacob Neusner, *Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970).

⁷² Sages who lived before Judah the Prince are called Tannaim, those who lived after Amoraim. Consequently, in rabbinic writings, one calls the corresponding material Tannaitic and Amoraic. The dividing line falls around 200, the date of major editing undertaken by Judah the Prince.

Temple provoked it, but my guess is that the components of the escape-legend are much older than that.⁷³

Rabbi Yohanan is one of the most important figures for the formation of Rabbinic Judaism. By establishing in Jamnia (Yavneh) a major academy, Yohanan laid the foundations on which rabbinic and Talmudic Judaism built their structure and made it possible for Judaism to reestablish itself after the destruction of the Temple. The material concerning the establishment of the academy at Yavneh is often called the Escape Legend, and this will be the focus of my comparison. The name “Escape Legend” could be misleading, however, because there is not single document with that title, whereas in the case of the Abgar legend we have the Acts of Addai. Furthermore, there is no “life of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai”; no equivalent either to Christian hagiographies or to pagan lives of great and meritorious men exist for the rabbis. We have only single stories, pericopae, which are never put into a systematic framework of Yohanan’s life.⁷⁴ Rabbis did not produce anything that resembles biographical or historical fiction like apostolic acts, for example. Rabbinic Haggada consists of stories and pericope scattered in a sea of Halakha. Still, in some ways, the situation regarding the stories about famous rabbis is similar to what we have found in the Christian tradition concerning the apostles and missionaries we have discussed above. We have piecemeal accounts scattered around; all the pieces

⁷³ Neusner, *Development*, 228. The main question in attempting to date the legend is why the story is so friendly to the Roman emperor responsible for the destruction of the Temple? The purpose of the story is to attest to the Roman patronage of Judaism. Any occasion on which the Sassanid monarchy decided to persecute the Jews could also be a good candidate. For example, well remembered is the persecution under Shapur I, which occurred around 260. According to Tal. M. K. 26a twelve thousand Jews were killed in Mesopotamia.

⁷⁴ Neusner, *Development*, 1.

provide enough indication that there was a larger narrative either in oral or written form.

Rabbi Yohanan met the future emperor Vespasian when he was a general conducting military operations against Jewish rebels toward the end of the first Jewish war 66-70. The story begins in the besieged Jerusalem when Vespasian gives the ultimatum to the Jews to submit. Rabbi Yohanan argues that the only way to save the Temple is to submit. Once his advice is rejected, he decides to escape the city. He is carried out in a coffin by his two most important disciples, Eliezer and Joshua. When the coffin is brought to the city gates, the gatekeepers would like to stab the coffin to make sure that no living being is smuggled out. Eliezer and Joshua warn the gatekeeper: do they want to be remembered for stabbing the corpse of Rabbi Yohanan? After the gates were passed, the disciples carry the coffin to Vespasian. The general has already heard about Yohanan's advice in favor of submission. Yohanan jumps out of the coffin and greets the general with the words, *Viva domine Imperator*. By calling him emperor, the general warns, he endangers Vespasian's life, for if the real emperor hears this, he will put him to death. Two or three days later the news arrives that Vespasian is the new emperor. To return the favor, Vespasian asks Rabbi Yohanan, what can I give you? Yohanan replied, give me Yavneh and its sages. In one version of the story, Yohanan asks for Jerusalem to be spared, but when the request is denied, he then asks for Yavneh. In any case, the rabbinic academy at Jamnia (Yavneh) is established.

Once again we find that the ending of the story is the founding of a religious community. What is important for our comparison is that somebody in Judaism of the third or fourth century found it necessary to create a story about a Rabbi from the first century and, moreover, to link him and his work with the Roman emperor. In spite of all the differences between the legend of Abgar and the Yohanan escape story, there is a common creative impulse; a shared desire for recognition.

Adiabene

The main characters of this story, king Izates of Adiabene and his mother Helena, are paradigms of righteous gentiles. Their conversion represents the most remarkable proselytizing success of Judaism in late antiquity.⁷⁵ As such they were remembered in rabbinic literature even as the details of their patronage of Judaism in the first century were fading in the memory.⁷⁶ The story takes place in a small Mesopotamian principality of Adiabene, located several hundred miles east of Edessa. At the time the city was a semi-independent kingdom under Roman protection, much like Judea or Edessa. The main character of the story is Izates, the young prince of Adiabene who is favored to inherit the kingdom but is threatened by many opponents, including his brothers.

⁷⁵ Louis H. Feldman, "Jewish Proselytism" in Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata eds. *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 376.

⁷⁶ Tannaitic literature often mentions the house of Adiabene, especially Helena. In all case the details of the story found in Josephus are forgotten, but the stories about the family's zeal for Judaism were remembered. See Lawrence Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene in Josephus and Rabbinic Sources" in Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata, *Josephus. Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 298.

The story is a typical Near Eastern court tale with a twist of religion and politics added to it. Their piety leads them to conversion and induces many acts of compassion towards Palestinian Jews, even though their religious observance does not always follow the letter of the Jewish law.⁷⁷ Rabbinic literature preserved mostly the details about their piety and righteousness while forgetting the historical material preserved in Josephus. What is preserved in the rabbinic literature tells us clearly about what was important for the readers of the story. The royal conversion enhances the reputation of Judaism and the whole community gains honor and respect.

The full version of the story is preserved in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.17-96, who relies on an unidentifiable outside source.⁷⁸ The account is in the form of a biography of a hero or divine man; the protagonist is Izates, the young king of Adiabene. The story is divided in eight sections. First, the birth of Izates is narrated, and the anonymous author adds to that account many of the mythical events that were supposed to accompany the birth of a divine man (20.17-23). In the second section (20.24-33), Izates' father dies and he is elected to the throne under contentious circumstances where two factions, the one pro-Persian, the other pro-Roman strive for power. Izates is the representative of the pro-Roman faction. In spite of resistance on the part of his brothers and rivals for the throne, Izates and his mother Helena proceed initially only with instruction, but finally

⁷⁷ For example M *Nazir* tells us how Helena, mother of Izates, took Nazirite vows during her visit to Palestine and continued to observe Nazirite status upon her return to Adiabene. She did not know that the Nazirite statutes couldn't be observed outside of the land of Israel. See Lawrence Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene in Josephus and Rabbinic Sources" in Feldman, *Josephus*, 298.

⁷⁸ See Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene," 294-5.

proceeded with a full conversion to Judaism.⁷⁹ The conversion is described in the third section (20.34-48). In Charax Spasini, the capital of the kingdom, a Jewish merchant named Ananias influences the wives of the king to worship according to the Jewish tradition. Both Izates and his mother Helena are converted and Izates proceeds to undergo circumcision in spite of the objections of his mother. The fourth section (20.49-53) describes Helena's journey to Jerusalem where she worships at the Temple and helps to alleviate the ongoing famine by asking her son Izates to send relief. The fifth section shows the king Izates in action on the stage of contemporary Near Eastern politics (20. 54-68). The deposed king of Parthia, Artabanus, seeks his help in order to regain his throne. As a righteous king, willing to help those who are wronged, Izates agrees and immediately emerges as a powerful player in the Parthian court. Artabanus is restored to the throne; to return the favor he grants to Izates the district of Nisibis with its large Jewish population. The sixth section continues to describe Izates's role in Parthian politics (20. 69-74). After the death of Artabanus his successor Vardanes tries to enlist Izates in a war against the Romans. Izates refuses to join, indicating once again that the purpose of this story, in the eyes of Josephus, is to show how beneficial Judaism can be for the Roman rule of the Near East. Vardanes is furious and turns against Izates by attacking his kingdom, but God sees through the wicked heart of Vardanes and he is killed in a palace coup. In the seventh section, Josephus describes the conspiracies organized against Izates in Adiabene (20.75-91). The main motif is again how God saved Izates

⁷⁹ It is clear why Josephus decided to include this story in the *Antiquities of the Jews*. Its purpose is to show how useful Judaism can be for the Roman administration of the Near East, because even the converts to Judaism are friendly toward Rome.

from all his enemies. The conversion of Izates and his family was a personal conversion; the rest of the population continued to follow their ancestral cults. The nobles dissatisfied with the new faith of Izates conspire to overthrow his, once with the help of an Arab sheik, the second time with the help of a Parthian king. They fail in both attempts, showing once again the power of Judaism in the context of Near Eastern politics. The eighth section concludes the account by describing death of Izates (20. 92-96). His mother Helena soon follows. Both Izates and Helena are buried in Jerusalem.

Of all the stories presented in this chapter, the story of king Izates most closely resembles the Abgar legend. Even the chief missionary of the story, the Jewish merchant Ananias, shares a name with one of the followers of the apostle Addai. The shared name can be a coincidence. More to the point, both missionary groups, Jewish and Christian, approach the court in a similar way. They are travelers, merchants, and at first they gain influence among the women at the court. The good word spread by the women at court eventually reaches the king, who then converts to the new religion. In the remainder of the story the great achievements of the king are narrated and they usually include references to the prestige that the king has achieved in the area. The political successes of the king are not directly attributed to divine favor; the new God never appears as a warrior to help the king in battle; but the success is actually an advertisement for the new religion. In both stories court life is described in some detail and all the episodes from that life serve the purpose of advertisement. They show how the new religion enhances the honor of the king both internally, at the court, and

externally, in his dealings with foreign leaders. Partly the similarity can be attributed to the analogous legal and social position of religious minorities in the Roman Empire; but also one should not forget that Josephus, the historian who preserved the Adiabene story, became one of the main sources of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, especially for Book One, which preserves the Abgar legend.

Summary of the Findings

All the stories analyzed above belong to the genre of court tale, because the action takes place at a court of a king. The genre is well established and it can be found in the Bible as well as in Greek and in Near Eastern literature.⁸⁰ While individual stories contain many variations, the common morphology is quite simple. An anonymous missionary arrives at the court. He or she is introduced to the court and recognized as a holy man or women. After the recognition comes an act of gratitude, including often the conversion of the king. The story of Yohanan ben Zakkai and the story of Mani do not have a conversion, but Vespasian acknowledges the holiness of Yohanan by patronizing the rabbinic academy at Yavneh and Shapur does a similar thing for Mani by giving him the permission to teach freely. The difference is not significant for the morphology of

⁸⁰ Daniel is the most notable Biblical example. See J. J. Collins, *Daniel*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 43-47. Many of the court tales in Greek can be found in Herodotus, such as the sagas about Greek sages (Solon, Thales, Bias) in the court of Croesus. For the court tale in Jewish literature see Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (HDR 26; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

the story, because either way the holiness of the missionary is recognized, by personal conversion or through patronage. In several stories these two acts are combined and the missionary is recognized both by a royal conversion and by one or many acts of patronage. The remainder of the story, if it exists at all, tells about the acts of the king and praises him for his pious actions. The stories include two acts of transformation: the king is transformed from being just another ruler to being a just and pious king; and the holy man or woman is also transformed from anonymity to holiness, because he or she has been recognized. At the center of the genre stands this act of mutual recognition.

The stories of royal patronage of the missionaries can be divided in two sub-groups, or sub-genera. First, there are stories that deal with a more or less contemporary missionary figure. The stories of Shapur's patronage of Mani; of the apostle of Georgia, Nino; the apostle of Ethiopia, Frumentius, or the apostle of Armenia, Gregory; the story of Vespasian and Rabbi Yohanan, king Izates of Adiabene – all these concern recent figures, and they began to circulate immediately after the events described therein took place. They do not represent a conscious effort to recreate the past and mold it according to the wishes and need of a particular religious community. They advertise the successes of a particular missionary saint. On the other hand, the Indian king Gondophares and the apostle Thomas, and king Abgar and the apostle Addai, deal with an apostolic figure from a more remote formative period, in the time of Jesus and the apostles.

We often call the stories that are about an apostolic figure Apostolic Acts, and the stories about contemporary figures Conversion Stories. This does not mean that contemporary figures like Gregory, Nino, or Mani were not considered apostles with regard to their missionary activities; on the contrary, most Christians understood the times of persecution under Diocletian and peace under Constantine as a second apostolic age.⁸¹ The difference lies not in substance but in details, in particular in the attempt of the latter group of stories to appropriate the past.

One should not draw too rigid a distinction between these two kinds of royal patronage stories. Common sense has it that legend is a traditional narrative or a collection of narratives, popularly regarded as historically factual, but actually a mixture of fact and fiction. There is no doubt that all the stories we have examined belong to the category of folktale. If one understands legend to be a fictional narrative with some kind of historical basis, regardless of how tenuous that basis might be, it is safe to call them legends. Throughout the chapter we have avoided labeling them legends, because legend, by itself, implies something fictional. While these stories are without much doubt fictional, they also had a very distinctive utilitarian purpose, which becomes evident in how they end. All of them, without exception, end with the giving of a permission to found a church, to organize a rabbinic school, or to teach openly. The royal character serves as a patron of the religious institution and a guarantor of its antiquity,

⁸¹ Thelamon, *Païens et Chrétiens*, 466.

integrity, and respectability. In effect, the story gives the community permission to exist.

Now that the genre of the story about the apostle Addai has been examined from the literary perspective and compared with other similar stories, we must turn to historical and sociological questions. Repeating Neusner's question, we must now ask when, where, or why it became important to make up such stories, and to whom it would have been useful. A good place to begin will be to determine who were the intended readers of these stories about the royal patronage of the apostles, missionaries, and rabbis and how they benefited from telling the stories about the royal patronage.

CHAPTER VI

PRELUDE TO CONSTANTINE – POWER AND DISCOURSE

Patronage and Power

The stories analyzed in the previous chapter give us a series of literary representations of patronage of a religious figure by a ruler. They are all structured around the central literary motifs of recognition and acknowledgment. By being received at the court, an anonymous missionary is recognized as a holy man or woman. The missionary is able to approach the monarch and is acknowledged as a respected member of the court. Likewise, the king is praised for receiving the holy man or woman and recognized as pious and wise. The exchange of recognition is the most important message that the stories send to their audience. The religious leader is depicted as an effective and trustworthy intermediary between the religious community and the center of power, the court. He or she has access to king's ear and can whisper words that make a difference.

The question posed in this chapter deals with the meaning of the act of patronage described in these stories and the relationship of power implied in them. Does this act of patronage come at the initiative of a monarch eager to establish and maintain social prominence, or does it symbolizes a moment of contest where the interested party, the one that seeks benefaction, induces the

act of patronage? In other words, should the Abgar legend be read a part of Christian triumph in late antiquity or as an attempt to redefine social boundaries by pressuring authorities from below into a clearly defined social role? We are searching, in other words, for the suitable way to read the Abgar legend and other stories of royal patronage of apostles, especially in the context of the late third century, a time that saw many twists and turns in the relationship between the empire and the Church. This time we will turn our attention away from the political façade of the story brought together by “Labubna” in fourth-century Syria, or from its intellectual aspects in the apologetic strategy of Christian scholars such as Eusebius, and start looking directly at the way power is constructed in these stories.

It is our conjecture that the stories of royal patronage of apostles expressed anxiety, desperation, and conflict between religious community and government authorities taking place in the third century. What might look to us like unrestrained praise of a ruler, must have sounded much more subversive in the third century. By telling stories that set up a role model for the ruler, pressure is put on state authorities to behave in the real world according to the model presented in the narrative world. By praising the king, the religious group manages to put him in a box where his behavior is controlled. The Christian church was beginning to understand the power of religion in politics and to position itself as an arbiter of piety and ultimately of legitimacy of government. During the third century such a claim to power on the part of religious communities was not taken seriously by the Roman government. Authorities

mistakenly underestimated the feelings of resentment harbored by disenfranchised nations in the Near East.¹ By telling the stories of royal patronage of apostles, the church was able not only to exert pressure on authorities, but also to insert itself as guarantor of the loyalty of the populace, to become an honest broker between the government and the people, and, thereby, to win their genuine support. The stories of royal patronage of an apostle played a major part in that transformation, because they arose during a time when Christian leaders were beginning to insert themselves into politics and slowly take a place alongside traditional Roman elites as mediators between the emperor and the people.²

Whereas the message of the royal patronage stories is always the same, the literary backdrop and characters of the stories vary. Some are set in the world of Constantine, other take place in the distant past, describing apostles of Jesus or rabbis from the first century. In the case of Judaism, where strictly speaking there are no apostles, the story of Yohanan ben Zakkai goes back to the founder of the rabbinic academy at Yavneh in order to transmit a message about contemporary Rabbinic Judaism. By describing the rabbi's encounter with Vespasian, the author's goal is to present Yohanan as a successful mediator between the Romans and the Jews and to enhance the prestige of his successors responsible

¹ Harold Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 139-153.

² Peter Brown pointed out that there was no sudden change from pagan aristocracy to Christian aristocracy in the position of power. He speaks of "blurring of the sharp division between a pagan past and a Christian present." See Peter Brown, "Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy" *JRS* 51 (1961), 1-11.

for the reconstitution of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple.³ With the appearance of the Christian monarchy these stories must have frequently served to protect the ruler's interests and increase his prestige, but quite often they were much more than political propaganda in favor of the rulers.⁴ Before the Christian monarchy was firmly established, the stories did not send the message in only one direction, from the ruler to the ruled; it traveled also from the ruled to the ruler. The transformation that occurs in all the stories, the transformation of an anonymous missionary into a holy man or woman, suggests that religious leaders claimed the position of arbiter of kings and their behavior. Such a reading of the text implies not merely subservience and compliance, but also resistance and assertion.

Royal patronage stories employed the old cliché of patron/client relationship, but the actors are changed. Religious leaders now take the role of the old civic aristocracy who traditionally worked as intermediaries between the court and the people. Pagan religious figures never needed to establish their credentials in the same way Christian or Jewish leaders had to, because pagan priests were not professionals, like bishops or rabbis. They already belonged to the ranks of the civic aristocracy and by virtue of their status already had an unfettered access to power. A large portion of the resentment that the "old elites" felt toward Christianity was due to the fact that the "new elites" were chipping away their

³ Jacob Neusner, *Development of a Legend* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 179-185.

⁴ The best example of how emperors used the Abgar legend to glorify themselves is the fresco found in the monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai representing Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959). There the emperor is portrayed as king Abgar and the whole episode is set up within the program of Byzantine re-conquest of the Holy Lands. The exploration of the usage of the Abgar legend in imperial iconography is outside the scope of this inquiry.

traditional role of brokers and mediators. The resentment mounted gradually, only to explode during the Great Persecution when the “pagan right” finally attempted to take matters in its own hands.⁵ How much things have changed is easily seen when one compares the casual nonchalance toward Christianity of Pliny in the second century with the zeal of the Great Persecution.

Our reading of the Abgar legend in the setting of the persecution, as it was elaborated in the chapter three, made it difficult to assume that the text had solely a laudatory function.⁶ The same kind of reading should be applied to all the royal patronage stories, even though in most cases their authors are anonymous figures. One should also consider their differences from Eusebius, in whose case we have a historical person who left us his writings and thought on many subjects, out of which we were able to reconstruct how he used the Abgar legend in the times of persecution. The authors of the Abgar legend and other stories of royal patronage, by contrast, did not leave behind such a paper trail and historical reconstruction is a difficult and speculative task. When historians are faced with the task of visualizing history from below, using materials often left unrecorded in official sources, the only methodological tool at our disposal is the adoption of a certain socio-cultural model.

The power/discourse model developed by Michel Foucault seems well fitted to answer the question why the discourse of royal patronage of missionaries was produced. The main point of Foucault’s theory is that power is not just oppressive

⁵ Drake, *Constantine*, 139-147.

⁶ See chapter 3.

force, but also a creative influence.⁷ Those who seek power need to tell new stories as well as to control what kind of stories are being told. For power to materialize it needs and produces discourse. Traditionally discourse is defined as an ordered exposition of a particular topic. In post-modern usage, discourse is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment." Foucault further argues that "discourse constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about."⁸ Foucault tried to explain how a narrative grows into a discourse and how its growth leads to a shift of power in society. Discourse is an expression of the power relationship between language and the object to which it referred, in this case the power of kings and the power of religious leaders.⁹

In the previous chapter, we studied the stories that properly constitute a discourse in Foucault's sense of the word, because they provided language for various religious groups – Jews, Manicheans, and Christians – to talk about politics. The stories gave the audience a clear idea of how the religious group in question was instituted and how from the very beginning that foundation was favored by the local authorities. Furthermore, the stories also defined the way in which religious communities perceived kingship. By portraying kings in a positive,

⁷ Discourse is a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby eds., *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 185.

⁸ Stuart Hall ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 44.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in his *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113-38.

light, the religious community not only gave its support to the powerful monarch, but also conditioned that support on royal support of the community. What is needed now is to describe the relationships of power behind that discourse.

According to Foucault the main purpose of discourse is to define an object, to limit it within certain bounds of behavior. In this case by disseminating these seemingly laudatory stories about kings, religious groups were actually defining kingship and limiting its ability to control religion. Two particular groups of people benefited from the stories. Rulers were obvious beneficiaries, because their authority was enhanced by pious acts of patronage toward a holy man or woman. The second beneficiary was the holy man or woman, but more concretely their successors, the bishops and the rabbis. As we concluded in the previous chapter, the act of recognition stands at the center of all the stories, and through this act of recognition the power flows in two directions, from the holy man or woman to the king and from the king to the holy man or woman. An ordinary king is transformed into a pious king who rules in accordance to God's will; the holy man or woman is transformed from an anonymous visitor to the court to an ultimate arbiter of piety and good government. In the stories we see the religious leaders exercising judgment over the political leaders and serving as the arbiters of their piety and ethics. Religious groups from the frontier region were entering into political discourse.

In the political system of the Late Roman Empire, the golden key to political power was access to the monarch.¹⁰ Personal contact with the emperor provided the only access to power and for that reason all of our stories deal with the problem of physical access to the court. The most unconcealed example is the Abgar legend, where the letter of recommendation from Jesus opens the doors of the royal court. Other stories do not fall short: Yohanan ben Zakkai is carried in a coffin pretending to be dead in order to reach Vespasian; Edessius and Frumentius were stranded and miraculously spared to become royal tutors; Gregory the Illuminator spends fifteen years in a dark pit before he can gain access to the court of the first Christian king of Armenia. All the stories share the common feature that access the court is difficult and perilous. Through holiness, however, one is able to gain access. What is impossible to ordinary men or women is possible to the holy man or woman. Once they have gained access to the court, they can now act as intermediaries between the religious community and the monarch. When they die, their role is taken over by their successors.

It was not only the royalty of satellite states of Rome, such as Armenia, Georgia, or Ethiopia, who were able to exercise patronage of religious groups. Within the empire the court of a governor was a microcosm of the court in one of the imperial capitals. Patron-client bonds extended out of Rome and Constantinople to the provinces where governors and other officials representing

¹⁰ The expression is taken from Robert Shephard, "Court Faction in Early Modern England" in *Journal of Modern History* 64 (December 1992), 723. The article speaks about early modern England, but the main anthropological principle can be applied to late antiquity. For a methodological debate see Ralph W. Nicholas, "Factions: A Comparative Analysis" in Steffen W. Schmidt et al., *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 57-58.

his power had a patronal role on the local level.¹¹ Those who did not have access to the court had to act through intermediaries. In our stories it is the religious leader, bishop or rabbi, who is presented as having access to the throne. He is not only recognized as a holy man (or woman) but also gains the role of an intermediary, and commands power and influence in the court.

In our examination of the power relationships implied by the stories of royal recognition and patronage of the apostles/missionaries, we will proceed in two steps. The encounter between a powerful patron and a powerless client is the setting for all our stories. First, we will look at how they continue the traditional topos of philosopher and king, present in the classical tradition. With the classical tradition, philosopher and king stories also challenge the legitimacy of kingship by testing its ability to recognize the philosopher. Their function is not essentially different from the function of the later royal patronage stories. In the work of Josephus, a religious leader begins to replace the philosopher and wise man of the classical tradition. Through channels that are often blurred, our stories appropriated this traditional literary motif, and Josephus can take much credit for introducing a Greco-Roman literary topos into Near Eastern literature. In addition the stories also invert the tradition, by introducing barbarians in a role previously reserved only for the Hellenes. Second, we shall turn to actual examples of interaction between religious leaders and rulers, in particular the encounters between bishops and emperors. The focus will be on encounters that took place before Constantine, because during those times the blueprint for stories of royal

¹¹ Peter Garnsey & Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Culture, and Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 151.

patronage was created. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that Constantine might have heard some of the stories of royal patronage and molded his own conversion to fit the expectations of the Christian audience. The intentions of Constantine have been and will remain a mystery to historians.¹² The evidence about how much Constantine knew about Christianity before his conversion is severely limited and hotly disputed, but the fact remains that the stories of royal conversions provided the language for Christians to talk about power, its limitations and responsibilities.

Philosophers and Kings – Appropriation of Tradition

Appropriation, directly translated from the Latin, means to take an object and make it one's own. The stories of royal patronage appropriate the traditional Hellenistic topos of the philosopher and the king, a motif commonly found in treatises on kingship and in various stories telling about encounters between kings and wise men.¹³ The process of appropriation changes the meaning and, according to Foucault, it is one of the ways to produce and control discourse.¹⁴ What was once complete and meaningful is taken over by the second system and made to stand for a new notion. The stories of royal patronage of apostles

¹² For the most recent interpretation of Constantine see Harold Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Drake argues against the common view that Constantine used the Church for political purposes. He wants to emphasize that the bishops also made a good use of Constantine's power and authority.

¹³ Many of these encounters of wise men with kings can be found in Herodotus, such as the sagas about Greek sages (Solon, Thales, Bias) in the court of Croesus.

¹⁴ Most societies possess narratives that become objects of variation, transformation, or commentary. M. Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 27-8.

present a traditional situation, an encounter between wise and holy man and women with the ruler, but the actors are different. Ethiopian kings, Indian kings, kings of Edessa, Georgian and Armenian royalty were not the rulers who were expected to harbor philosophers at their courts.

The trajectories of appropriation can be reconstructed with some certainty. It was in the works of Josephus that the first step of appropriation took place. In his struggle to obtain recognition for himself and for Judaism in politically precarious times, he presents several stories of royal patronage of Judaism. At the same time and probably independently from Josephus, these stories were transmitted through the channels of oral and written transmission operational within the bounds of Rabbinic Judaism.¹⁵ In the later part of the third century Christians and Manicheans realized how valuable the genre can be for obtaining political recognition for a religious group. Who made the first step on the Christian side, and when and where, cannot be determined. However, once Gallienus issued an edict in 260 recognizing the corporate status of the church, allowing it to hold property, stories of royal patronage became even more valuable, offering an additional guarantee that the church has rights to hold property regardless of the whims of a particular emperor. Christians also were beginning to learn how to play the game of power in the Late Roman Empire, a game defined by the complicated web of patronage and clientage.

¹⁵ It is not necessary to suppose that the rabbis borrowed the stories from Josephus. The stories in Josephus were already circulated and are taken from existing, but unnamed sources. See Lawrence Schiffman, "The Conversion of Royal House of Adiabene in Josephus and Rabbinic Sources," in Feldman, *Josephus*, 294.

The rules of the game were defined by the classical tradition, because quite early the Greeks became aware that the power of a monarch is never absolute. The king depends on the web of friend, followers, and servants, who provide loyalty in exchange for benefice.¹⁶ In order to obtain benefice, one needed to advertise his or her attractiveness to the court. Even seemingly powerless persons, such as philosophers, could point out how the patronage of their lofty profession can benefit the court. Some of the philosopher's wisdom can rub onto the king, who can become more respected and thereby increase his legitimacy. Whether or not the ruler possessed wisdom to recognize that even the most humble supplicant can become an opportunity to show his beneficence was often tested. Gods could often appear in a humble form to test the generosity of a king, thereby confirming or rejecting his legitimacy. Failure to recognize a divine or a divinely inspired visitor because of his or her humble garments is an indication that the person is not worthy of kingship.¹⁷ A king should behave in a kingly manner toward even the most humble of guests at the court.

Monarchy survives by nurturing the feeling that everyone is a possible candidate for patronage. The image of inclusion is necessary for the monarchy because conspiracy is born in the minds of disappointed supplicants. The fear that the king might inadvertently exclude an important person from patronage led to an opening for the marginal groups that would be otherwise excluded from the

¹⁶ Klaus Bringmann, "The King as Benefactor" in Anthony Bulloch et al. eds., *Images and Ideologies: Self-definition in the Hellenistic World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 7-24.

¹⁷ In Euripides' *Bacchae* Pentheus, the tyrant of Thebes, is severely punished for failing to recognize that the humble visitor to his court was no other but god Dionysus.

list of beneficiaries. A marginal group needs to advertise itself as a potential beneficiary of royal patronage and explain what can the king gain by granting the benefice.

Plato advertises his humble profession by saying that good government couldn't be achieved "unless either philosophers become kings in our cities or those whom we now call kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy."¹⁸ The ideal never gained much popularity, but philosophers more commonly served rulers as educators, advisors, or ambassadors. As welcomed persons at court, philosophers came close to the center of power without actually exercising it. They also had to bear the risks associated with the life of courtiers, striving to obtain the royal favor and avoiding falling out of favor. Recognition by the ruler is crucial and can transform the person who seeks it. In return the philosopher can offer to the ruler the honor of patronizing wise men and thereby becomes a philosopher-king. The epithet was not just a badge of honor, because wisdom is something that adds to the ruler's legitimacy.

How the game of patronage was played is clearly revealed in the story preserved by Plutarch telling about the visit of Carneades the Academic and Diogenes the Stoic to Rome. Having been conquered by Roman armies, the city of Athens in 155 BC sent these two philosophers to ask for release of the penalty of five hundred talents imposed on Athens by the Roman Senate. Plutarch describes the magical powers of Carneades's words: "the gracefulness of Carneades's oratory, whose ability was really the greatest, and his reputation

¹⁸ Plato, *Republic* 473d.

equal to it, gathered large and favorable audiences, and long filled, like a wind, all the city with the sound of it.” The impact of the philosopher’s word was largely felt by the young people. He had “impressed so strange a love upon the young men, that quitting all their pleasure and pastimes, they ran mad, as it were, after philosophy.”¹⁹ Carneades and Diogenes might have completely bewitched the Romans and their sober institutions were it not for cool-minded Cato, the protector of traditional virtue of sobriety. Hearing about how the philosophers were able to obtain an interpreter and an audience in the Senate, Cato blamed the magistrates for letting these ambassadors stay so long and required that the Senate immediately resolved the issue of their petition, so that these people, “who could easily persuade the people to what they please,” could be quickly returned to Athens.

The story clearly indicates how dangerous it can be to let people of considerable charisma and skill at oratory mingle with the magistrates of the state. Questions of recognition and access are at the forefront of this story. The fact that the philosophers were able to obtain an audience with the Roman Senate leads to their recognition, and recognition leads to power. Through the skill and wisdom of her philosophers, Athens was able to gain by diplomatic channels what she had lost in the war. The philosophers proved to be a valuable asset for Athenian diplomacy and operated as successful power brokers.

Patron and benefactor are images traditionally associated with Hellenistic kings. Only the man who is just should be king, because the king is the source of

¹⁹ Plutarch, *Cato* in Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, John Dryden translation (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 475.

justice. According to Hellenistic treatises on kingship, the function of the king is threefold – military command, dispensation of justice, and cult of the gods.²⁰

Aristotle says that patronage (εὐεργεσία) is the origin of monarchy. It was on the benefactors of cities and nations that the honor of kingship was first bestowed.²¹

The king was expected to be a benefactor of the people, because he can earn their love by his beneficence and humanity.²² An important caveat must be added to this statement: Beneficence should be limited to the Greeks (or in our case, the Romans). Aristotle advised Alexander: “Deal with the Greeks as a leader, with the barbarians as a master, taking care for the former as friends and kinsmen, while treating the latter as animals or plants.”²³

Josephus tried to get around Aristotle’s advice on how to treat the barbarians by telling the story about Alexander’s patronage of the Jewish high priest Jaddua, who had the unfortunate destiny to hold this position during Alexander’s passage through Syria and Palestine toward Egypt.²⁴ Outside Josephus this story has also been preserved in the rabbinic literature.²⁵ The story indicates that the barbarians, even though in powerless position, had one weapon at their disposal: the king’s desire to present himself as a benefactor of piety. Like all the other royal patronage stories, this story also contains a transformation of an

²⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 3. 14. 12. Often quoted by later authors. See Stobaeus, *Florilegium*, 4. 7. 6.

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1286b10-12.

²² Polybius 5.11.6.

²³ Aristotle F658 Rose. See also: Klaus Bringmann, “The King as Benefactor” in Anthony Bulloch ed., *Images and Ideologies: Self-definition in the Hellenistic World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 8.

²⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 11.8.4-7.

²⁵ *Megillath Ta’anith*.

anonymous figure into a religious leader. It begins by describing Jaddua terrified at the thought that the brutal army of undefeated Macedonians will enter Jerusalem. Fortunately, God offered help. In a dream Jaddua was told to go forward and meet Alexander in a solemn procession before he reached the city. When the encounter occurred, the timid high priest was transformed into an important religious figure. Alexander prostrated himself before the name of God inscribed on the high priest's miter. The culmination of the surprise comes when Alexander tells about his dream in Macedonia, seeing a strange man dressed exactly like the high priest. The anonymous figure urged him not to delay crossing the Hellespont, because God had given him the dominion over the Persians. In return for this favorable omen, Alexander showered Jerusalem with benefices and offered several important legal privileges to the Jews, including the right to follow their own law.

The story not only confirms that the act of recognition and transformation is the primary identifier of the genre, but also provides a valuable example of a Greek monarch offering benefices to a barbarian leader. The shift from Greek to barbarian is the major variation made in the process of appropriation. The popular memory that was preserved in Josephus certainly undermines Aristotle's advice to limit benefice only to Greeks and exclude barbarians from power.²⁶ The shift from Greek to barbarian is not, however, the only transformation that his story performs. In the story the client of royal patronage is not only barbarian; he has also been transformed from a philosopher into a religious leader. As is the

²⁶ See also Klaus Bringmann, "The King as Benefactor" in Bulloch, *Images and Ideologies*, 8.

case with other royal patronage stories, the question whether or not such an event ever occurred is irrelevant.²⁷

Aristotle might have advised kings to be ethnically exclusive, but such a policy could not be fully implemented in a social system where patronage played an important role. The main difference was not between Romans, Greeks and barbarians, but between those who had access to the monarch and those who did not. Because of the connections that they had, Greeks and Romans, however, had a far superior access to the king than the barbarians. Since there was a shortage of intermediaries among the barbarians, they were in a disadvantaged position. The patronage system, nonetheless, is colorblind and cuts across ethnic and racial lines. Seneca pointed out that the emperor who played a role of great patron had no need of guards, because he was “protected by his benefits” (*Clem.* 1.13.5). What was obvious to Seneca must have been clear to Josephus. What Seneca took for granted and Josephus struggled to achieve was access to the emperor. Josephus knew well that in the patronage system some voices are heard and some are not. A letter sent to the court might or might not be read. A person recommended by a powerful intermediary is heard immediately.

The picture of a conquered nation sending emissaries to the victor is repeated by Josephus, who describes a critical encounter between the holiest of all rabbis at the time, Yohanan ben Zakkai, and the vanquisher of Jerusalem, emperor Vespasian. Josephus’s story represents a transitional point between the Greco-

²⁷ Historical sources give us no indication that the encounter ever occurred.

Roman type, which describes the encounter between the wise man and the king, and the Near Eastern type, which describes the encounter between the holy man and the king. When talking about Jewish sects, Josephus consciously presents them on the model of Greco-Roman philosophical schools.²⁸ Josephus puts the barbarian on the same level as the Greek. All our stories will follow his example. It makes no difference that in the Abgar legend both the king and the apostle are barbarians. They have learned the game of power. It was Josephus who opened the door for a barbarian to be presented as a successful client. Remaining stories go even a step further. They now begin to portray the barbarian king as the paragon of beneficence, the virtue associated with Hellenistic kings.

In the third chapter we have discussed how useful the work of Josephus was for Eusebius and his apologetic agenda. There are indications that Josephus began to exercise influence on Christian thinking well before Eusebius. It was primarily through the works of Clement of Alexandria, Julius Africanus, and ultimately Origen that Christians began to weave Josephus into their narrative and treat him as the “Fifth Gospel.”²⁹ To early Christian apologists Josephus proved indispensable because he was the only writer who was able successfully to combine classical history with the history of Israel. Christian apologists were seeking to rewrite classical history to find the place for Christianity in it. Josephus

²⁸ The sects are described in *AJ* 13.5.9 and *BJ* 2.8.2 as well as in *Vita* 2 where he directly compares the Jewish sect to Greek philosophical schools. Josephus emphasizes their teachings on free will and predestination in order to make them analogous to Greek philosophical schools. The Sadducees are like Epicureans because they teach complete freedom of the will. Josephus compares the Essenes to the Cynics because of their shared belief in complete predestination. In the middle are the Pharisees, who are compared with the Stoics, and who like the Stoics teach that some things are in our power and some are not.

²⁹ Heinz Schreckenberg, “The Works of Josephus and the Early Christian Church” in Feldman, *Josephus*, 317.

had already accomplished the same task for Judaism. One suspects that the relevant material trickled down from Christian apologists to ordinary Christians, who then began to see the history of the early Principate as the history of the times of Jesus Christ. Augustus and Tiberius, slowly but surely, became “the good guys,” even though the gospels are mostly silent about them. Early Christian “rehabilitation” of Augustus and Tiberius, accomplished with the help of Josephus, opened the way for a more accommodating relationship between Christian communities and Roman power.

The circulation graph of the royal patronage stories (page 174) indicates that the Jewish stories are the earliest. Manicheans and Christians learned the art of obtaining access to the court from the Jews, a religious group with a proven track record of getting recognition for their practices considered unusual in the ancient world. The Jews simply had more experience, both positive and negative, and the fact that they were able to survive as a religious group after the destruction of the Temple indicates how creative they must have been under difficult circumstances.

Christians in particular did not have much luck in obtaining access to power until the middle of the third century. The example of Jesus was the biggest obstacle, because his condemnation to death by a Roman governor was not a model to follow to gain access to court. Jesus was not alone in his refusal to play the game of patronage. Following the most prominent example of Socrates, many Stoic and Cynic philosophers believed that their duty was to speak truth to

power regardless of consequences.³⁰ Both Christian and Classical traditions record that there were always people who refused to play the game of patronage. Christianity could afford to ignore the rules of the game while it was a minor religious sect on the fringes of the society. As new converts began to fill the church, the need emerged to deal with power in a more efficient and predictable manner.

While one cannot reconstruct with certainty all the trajectories along which various religious groups appropriated the classical motif of the royal patronage of philosophers, Jewish and Christian writings clearly manifest a desire to appropriate that tradition. In the previous section we have analyzed how Josephus appropriated the motif for the purpose of Jewish apologetics. On the Christian side the best example of appropriation can be found in the apocryphal correspondence between Seneca and Paul. The correspondence is dated to the fourth century.³¹ The details of that apocryphal correspondence should not concern us here. What is important is that the correspondence testifies to the impulse in the Christian community to elevate the apostle Paul to the status of an influential philosopher of Seneca's high reputation. Several passages in the correspondence indicate that Seneca had unfettered access to the emperor and claim that Paul enjoyed almost the same privileges. More than a few times Seneca mentions how he had read Paul's letters to the emperor and testifies that

³⁰ Epictetus often talks how only those who are not concerned with their possessions and honor are really free. They are not afraid of telling the truth because nothing can be taken away from them and no benefice can be offered to buy their silence. See Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.2.19-21.

³¹ Cornelia Römer, "Correspondence between Seneca and Paul" in Wilhelm Scheemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 46-7.

the emperor “was moved by your [Paul’s] sentiments.”³² The correspondence is rightly placed in the fourth century, because the relationship between the emperor, Seneca, and Paul closely correspond to the relationship between the Christian emperor, an influential bishop situated at court, and a provincial bishop without access to the court.

Christians Learn the Basics of Politics

During the Late Roman Empire, religious leaders, nuns, monks, priests, Christian and Manichean apostles, bishops, and missionaries began to play a part in politics. They represent a hitherto oppressed and unrecognized group seeking recognition and tolerance. For a religious community with an unclear legal status, its only weapon was to threaten the rulers with Divine punishment for their lack of compliance with what they understood to be the will of God. During the persecution this was the weapon of last resort in moments of desperation and total powerlessness. Christians in the East slowly became aware how powerful this threat could be, especially after the emperor Valerian, who attempted to undertake a systematic persecution, was captured and killed by the Persians (Parthians) in 260. An unprecedented spectacle of Roman emperor being captured and publicly humiliated by the enemy was a shocking image in and of itself. It was an event that shattered the basic Roman understanding of how the universe functions, and it needed to be explained on

³² Scheemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 48-9.

the cosmic level. The thought that loomed in people's mind was this: the emperor must have done something extremely impious and was punished. Christians quickly jumped to say that the act of hubris was the persecution of Christianity. Others believed that the presence of Christians in the empire was the sacrilege that led to Valerian's demise.³³

We know that by this time the Acts of Thomas circulated in upper Mesopotamia.³⁴ Were the Christians reading the story of the apostle Thomas's voyage to India and his patronage by the king Gondophares in light of what happened to Valerian? In the Acts of Thomas, King Gondophares commits sacrilege when he sends the apostle to prison. He accused Thomas of fraud because instead of building the palace for the king, the apostle gives money to the poor. Divine retribution falls on the brother of Gondophares, who falls victim to the king's transgression and dies. We do not know for certain whether or not the Christians of Edessa read the contemporary political events into the story of Gondophares and his unfortunate brother, but the principle behind the text is obvious. What is true for the narrative world is true also for the real world of politics: failure to recognize the apostle of God can only result in divine retribution.

Dionysius of Alexandria, Valerian's contemporary, was quick to point out that Valerian's death was nothing else but divine retribution for persecuting

³³ Lactatius, *De Mortibus*, 10.

³⁴ Scholars usually date the Acts of Thomas to the beginnings of the third century and assign them to the region of Edessa. See A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 23 and Gilles Quispel, *Makarius, Das Thomasevangelium und das Lied von der Perle* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 39

Christians. Talking about Valerian and his sinister advisor Macrian, the bishop of Alexandria quotes Isaiah saying: "They have chosen their own way and their own abominations; their souls delighted in them. I will choose to mock them and for their sins I will repay them."³⁵ Some Christians were beginning to learn the lesson and to realize how the fear of divine retribution could be a powerful instrument of politics.

Gallienus, successor to the unfortunate Valerian, ordered immediately that churches and cemeteries be restored to the Christians and issued an edict that guaranteed the church's right to hold property as a corporation. We do not know whether Gallienus was motivated by fear of divine wrath from the Christian God, but he would not be the first emperor whose actions were influenced by superstition or at least caution. The edict represented a very important change in the legal status of Christianity. It allowed the church to own not only the buildings where the meetings took place, but also cemeteries and various other properties. The only Christian building preserved from the times before Constantine comes from Dura Europos in Mesopotamia, and it was destroyed by the Sassanids in 256.³⁶ The building is not imposing, but it indicates that the Christians were becoming more and more visible even before Gallienus issued his edict allowing the church to hold property as a corporation.

Could we assume that because Christianity was becoming more visible, it also became more assertive and started to count in the matters of power? By

³⁵ Isa. 66:3-4. Quoted in *HE* 7.10.7.

³⁶ Carl H. Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, excavations at Dura Europos final report vol. VIII, pt. II. (New Haven: Dura-Europos Publications. 1967), 25. See also Michael L. White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, vol. 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1996), 153.

issuing the edict that recognized the corporate status of the church, Gallienus provided such an opening. Among the first to seize upon this opening provided by the emperor was the bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, who in 261 wrote a letter that credited the emperor Gallienus with rejuvenating the empire and “dispelling darkness and restoring light” in a manner which the bishop hailed in Messianic language from Isaiah.³⁷ While there is no evidence that Dionysius of Alexandria asked anything in return for his laudatory words about Gallienus, it is obvious that the bishop was building a “reservoir of good will.” It is not inconceivable that some future bishop might want to test whether or not the “reservoir of good will” could be bartered for a concrete favor granted by the emperor to the Christian community.

The second opportunity for Christians to learn the basics of Roman politics appeared when Paul of Samosata, the bishop of Antioch, refused to abandon the episcopal residence after the synod of bishops held in 268/9 deposed him from his see. In a surprising move the synod of bishops appealed to emperor Aurelian to settle the situation; just as surprisingly the emperor accepted the arbitration and decided that the episcopal residence should be assigned to the faction that was recognized by the bishop of Rome. As consequence of the imperial arbitration, Paul of Samosata was “thrown out of the church in the most ignominious manner by the secular authority.”³⁸

³⁷ Eusebius, *HE* 7.10-11 and 7.23, especially 7.23.4. See also: Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989), 554.

³⁸ *HE* 7.30.12.

The fact that in the controversy over Paul of Samosata one Christian faction appealed to the emperor against the other has caught the attention of many scholars.³⁹ Some believe that such an act was inconceivable unless larger political issues were at stake. If Paul of Samosata was an appointee of queen Zenobia, who was in rebellion against Rome from 267-272, this would explain why the emperor Aurelian (270-275) did not hesitate to intervene in the local Christian controversy. This interpretation, offered initially by G. Bardy and G. Downey, does not explain why a religious group, which had avoided secular authorities for several hundreds of years and was strictly prohibited from taking its own disputes to secular courts, suddenly felt comfortable to call upon the emperor and rely on his judgment.⁴⁰ Fergus Millar debunked the Zenobia connection as fiction, leaving us to face the issue of imperial arbitration head-on.⁴¹

The episode with Paul of Samosata, his removal from office by a local synod, an appeal to the emperor, and his eventual ousting from the episcopal residence with the help of imperial troops, is the first historically verifiable instance of imperial patronage of a Christian community. What is most surprising is that the emperor was willing to insert himself in a purely internal conflict of the Church. If the emperor did not intervene, as Bardy and Downey believed, because Paul

³⁹ A brief review of scholarship is offered by Fergus Millar, "Paul of Samosata, Zenobia, and Aurelian: Church, Local Culture, and Political Allegiance in Third-Century Syria" in *Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), 1-17.

⁴⁰ G. Bardy, *Paul de Samosate: étude historique*, Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense IV (1929) and G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (1961), 263-4, 310-15.

⁴¹ Millar, "Paul of Samosata", 1-17.

was an “appointee” of the seditious Queen Zenobia, whom the emperor defeated in 272, then what was the reason for the intervention? Fergus Millar answers that question. Practically speaking, Aurelian was resolving a property issue, a normal procedure since the emperor’s primary role was to dispense justice. What is more interesting is how the church reacted to the imperial intervention. The anti-Pauline faction offered its loyalty to the emperor, pointing the finger at the Pauline faction as the “fifth column” of the seditious queen. By overemphasizing its loyalty to the empire, the anti-Pauline faction was successful in its petition for imperial arbitration of a property dispute. It mastered the game of patronage: an excessive declaration of loyalty puts pressure on the government to reward such an outburst of patriotism and devotion. People in government can resist pressure, but only a select few, especially in the government, can resist the lure of flattery.

Diocletian was one of those few who were determined to resist the “new politics” of his time. He was determined to bring back honesty and sobriety to the empire, much as Cato was able to counter the influence of sweet talking Athenian philosophers. Diocletian was firm in his belief that religious groups had begun to exercise undue influence on the politics of the empire, particularly on people of “superior rank,” and in so doing to undermine the security of the empire. Diocletian was especially worried about religious groups that were able to travel freely through the porous “Eastern frontier,” such as Manicheans, Jews, and Christians. Diocletian was wondering what the real intentions of these groups were and what kind of instruction they received from the hostile Persian

sovereign and his well-developed network of spies. First, he voiced his suspicion in the anti-Manichean edict issued in 297.⁴² The edict reveals that many people of “superior rank” became members of the sect. Diocletian decrees that property of “any persons of the official status” will be confiscated in order to stop the influence of the “infamous doctrine of the Persians,” and thereby acknowledges how far the previously unknown religious and cultural groups were able to infiltrate government circles. Should there be any doubt that here Diocletian was talking about powerful Romans who were patrons of Manichean missionaries?

The Abgar legend and the accounts of Armenian and Georgian conversion belong to the schizophrenic age of Diocletian and Constantine, when religious leaders could one day find themselves in prison and the next day be welcomed at the court. All three stories reflect this uncertainty facing leading Christian figures. The apostle Addai is well received by king Abgar, but his successor Manu does not hesitate to kill the apostle’s successor Aggai. Gregory the Illuminator is taken from a dark pit full of wild beasts and introduced to King Tiradates. Nino the apostle of Georgia is welcomed at the court as a slave woman, who only subsequently shows her power to perform miracles. The uncertainty facing bishops in the time of Diocletian and Constantine and the possibility of the sudden reversal of fortune is not just a literary device employed to make the story more interesting. It was reality for many bishops who were literally taken from the mines and introduced to Constantine.⁴³

⁴² A. Adam, *Texte zum Manichismus* (Kleine Texte 175), 82-3. Translation in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1987), 267-8.

⁴³ Eusebius describes the joy of Christians caused by the end of persecution with uncontrolled enthusiasm. *HE* 20.9.6-9.

It is no coincidence that the stories of royal patronage of the apostles developed in the frontier region, where several semi-independent satellite states, such as Georgia, Armenia, Ethiopia, and Adiabene, existed in a buffer region. The frontier in late antiquity was not a line that clearly divided states, but the area where the power of patronage of one ruler touched the area of benefaction of another. The two Jewish stories are indicative, because they come from different sides of the Roman-Persian border. Comparing the story of King Izates of Adiabene with Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's encounter with Vespasian, we see that the Jews, since they were living on both sides of the border, had options. Persian and Roman patron had to compete for their patronage.

Rulers of Armenia, Georgia, and Ethiopia were quick to understand that the fastest way to gain favor with Constantine and his successor was to embrace Christianity and follow the emperor's example of lavish patronage of the church. The story of royal conversion in Georgia ends with the letter from the freshly converted King Mirian to Constantine. The embassy carries a petition requesting that priests be sent to complete the work of Christianization. When the Emperor has heard about the conversion of Iberia, continues the account, "he was far more glad at this news than if he had annexed to the Roman Empire peoples and realms unknown." The message delivered to Constantine is subtle but clear. An important piece of frontier area has been finally locked, sealed, and isolated from the political currents on the other side of the border, Sassanid Persia.

How Christian leaders were able to take their place in politics is clearly shown in the chronologically latest story of the conversion of the king of Axum. The final

arbiter is no longer the king or the governor, but none other than the controversial bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius. Frumentius, the man who converted the king of Axum and rose through the ranks to become a sort of a prime minister, travels to Alexandria where he tells the whole story to the patriarch Athanasius. The patriarch ordains him as the first bishop of the Indians and he returns there with episcopal authority in addition to the political authority he already wielded at the court of Axum. In short, the stories of royal patronage of apostles provided the blueprint for the behavior not only of kings, but also of bishops. King Abgar could be understood as the precursor of Constantine, but the apostle Addai can be taken as the precursor of Ambrose or any other powerful bishop of the fourth century who wielded influence upon the imperial court. What happened in the microcosm of the narrative world, set in the exotic places of the Near East, began to happen in macrocosm of the imperial court at Constantinople and on a smaller scale at the court of every provincial governor.

Conclusion

In the latter part of the third century and the early fourth century, the royal conversion stories became training tools for Christian communities, teaching them how to behave at court. They offered to the Christian leadership a wide variety of situations to learn from and to apply if a favorable situation arose. Most aspects of courtly life were already covered by royal patronage stories, from how to approach the court in a humble manner, how to preach to the courtiers, how to

ask for benefice, to how to react in case the request was denied. It was through such stories that Christianity acquired its political vocabulary and its leaders became courtiers. During the course of the third and fourth century, Christian bishops gradually became Roman aristocrats.

Nobody expressed this change of elites better than the mid-fourth-century Roman aristocrat Praetextatus. A steadfast pagan, Praetextatus exclaimed: "If I could be bishop of Rome, I would become Christian on the spot."⁴⁴ An aristocrat can recognize another aristocrat, and Praetextatus understood that the power of the "old elite" is being replaced with the "new elite." In the fourth century the trappings of episcopal power became considerable. Ammianus Marcellinus, after observing the lifestyle of the bishop of Rome, concluded that whoever holds that office "will be secure for the future, being enriched by offerings from matrons, riding in carriages, dressing splendidly, and even feasting luxuriously, so that their entertainments surpass even royal banquets."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, one must understand how the bishops of the fourth century achieved their prominent status and through what channels they were able to rise to a position of influence. Powerful bishops of the fourth century, such as Athanasius of Alexandria, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Basil of Caesarea, and Pope Damasus of Rome, all had their legendary and often invented precursors in the not as much celebrated missionaries to remote regions of the Roman Empire depicted in the royal conversion stories. The church tested the waters of politics and prepared itself for legalization on the edges of the empire.

⁴⁴ Praetextatus humorous comment is reported by Jerome, *Contra Joannem*, 8.

⁴⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus, 27.3.14.

Is it a coincidence that, when Constantine announced to the world his vision at the Milvian Bridge and his subsequent conversion to Christianity, he never mentioned an intermediary, an apostle, a missionary, who instructed him into the new faith? The answer to such a question requires a study of Constantine, which is not the subject of this dissertation. Nevertheless, we have shown that the stories about royal patronage of the apostles imply a certain amount of restraint in the behavior of the kings. Religious groups, by creating stories about royal beneficence, were able to put rulers in a box. It is doubtful that Constantine would have felt comfortable with such restraints. His communication with the deity was direct, without intermediaries. Despite all his personal flaws, Constantine understood politics and knew very well what power is and what it can achieve. He knew how to “top” all the rivals. The others, minor rulers when compared with the Emperor, had to content themselves with conversion stories, hoping to gain credibility in the process.

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